

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE

JULY 15TH

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

TWICE
A MONTH

THE **MURDER SYNDICATE**

A VEE BROWN NOVEL

by **CARROLL JOHN DALY**

FOOL'S JEWELS

by **MAXWELL HAWKINS**

AND OTHERS



BILL...I'D NEVER KNOW YOU...HOW DID YOU EVER LOSE THAT BIG STOMACH YOU HAD?

I SENT IN A COUPON...GOT A WEIL BELT AND BOYS, IT'S GREAT I REDUCED MY WAIST FROM 44 INCHES TO 36 INCHES!

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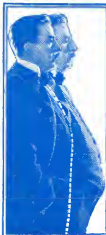


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REDUCTION
during the
SUMMERTIME

■ We want you to test the Weil Belt. NOW...at our expense; for we know that you will reduce more quickly during the summer months!



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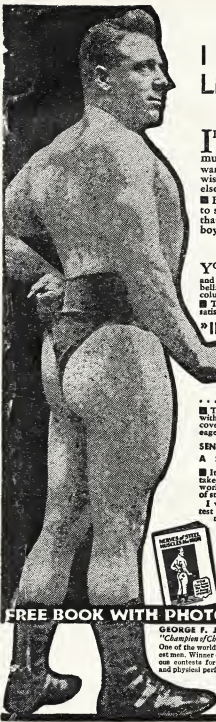
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EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 13

CONTENTS for JULY 15th, 1934

No. 1

SMASHING VEE BROWN DETECTIVE NOVEL

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The Murder Syndicate.....Carroll John Daly 10

As the underworld starts in to operate on a modern business basis—begins to advertise for its victims.

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Pick up your change from a

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Wrested from a thief who stole the pennies off a dand man's eyes.

GRIPPING MIDNIGHT MURDER THRILLER

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That lay on a horror hearth pointing its finger at the killer.

We've planned a double dime's worth of danger and

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Beginning with the next issue of DIME DETECTIVE. How does it strike you?

Cover—"A Yellow Face Appeared at the Window".....John Howitt
From "Foot's Jewels."

Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

Watch for the August 1st Issue

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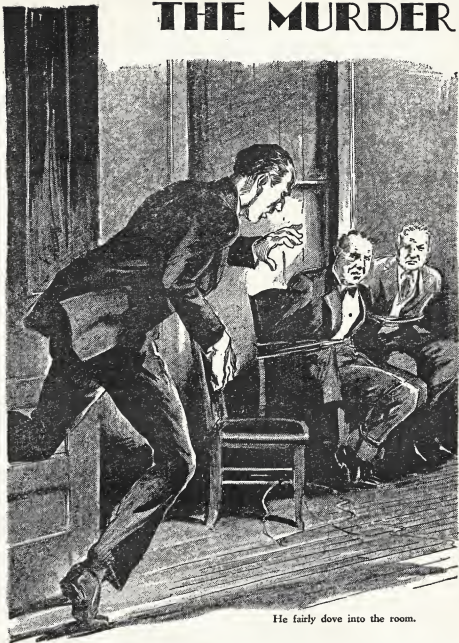
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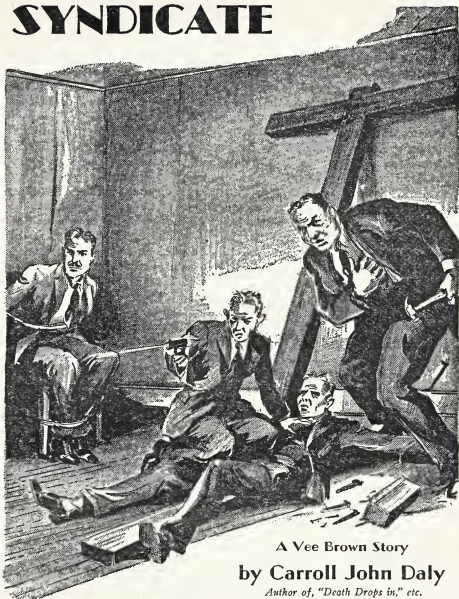
THE MURDER



He fairly dove into the room.

"Pay—or be tacked to the wall, a living picture-lesson to those who balk our demands!" That was the gruesome warning the Murder Syndicate had thrust upon the City. And only Vee Brown—Crime Machine and Killer of Killers—believed it meant just what it said. For he knew that crime had been put on a business basis—that murder, at last, had begun to advertise!

SYNDICATE



A Vee Brown Story

by Carroll John Daly

Author of, "Death Drops in," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Pay or Die!

DETECTIVE VEE BROWN had an irritating habit of letting a cigarette dangle from the center of his mouth. Whether it was the droop of the cigarette, the half-curve to the cor-

ners of his mouth, or the narrowed mocking of his black eyes that produced the effect, I don't know. It might have been any one of these—or a combination of all three—that riled me. But the smoldering flattened cigarette was, or seemed to be, the center of derision about which his whole irritating manner settled.

I noticed that drooping cigarette dis-

tinctly now. We were in the great drawing room of Mortimer Doran, the district attorney. Doran—big and flabby—seeming to throw his body from side to side as he walked, like a pacer, never got the full benefit of that cigarette. It straightened in Brown's mouth each time the D. A. faced him, and seemed to change the entire expression of his face.

But Inspector Ramsey, as big and broad and perhaps just as heavy as the district attorney, though his weight was bone and muscle, got the full force of it. And it had his goat. Never liking Vee Brown to begin with, and being in the awkward position of having no control over Brown, who was assigned to the district attorney's office, he had to stand it. Stand it, I mean—not take it. For Ramsey wasn't taking it.

"Hell!" Ramsey clapped a huge hand down on his knee. "We'll never get very far, Mr. Doran, if you brought me here to spend the evening watching this grinning monkey."

MMORTIMER DORAN swung around. He was not a quick-tempered man, but he was a bad-tempered one. And at certain times he was not above saying what he felt, whether it was to the mayor, a common citizen, or even a newspaperman. Now his little eyes smoldered; his words were quick and sharp.

"You've complained all evening, Ramsey; torn down every statement Brown has made but offered nothing constructive in its place. Damn it! You're worse than a child at times, and you a man who headed the homicide squad in its day. If you know something—" And when Ramsey started to interrupt, "It isn't entirely necessary to have you here at all, Ramsey. Sometimes I think I've tolerated you more than—"

"Nor is it necessary for the police department to work in with the district at-

torney's office," Ramsey cut in "Without any disrespect, sir, I wish to say that the records—the facilities and the cooperation of the department—are readily available and freely offered to your office. If the commissioner wished, he—"

"But he doesn't wish!" Mortimer Doran snapped him off. Then his temper softened. It was some time since the police and the district attorney's office had worked in such harmony and it was mainly through the efforts of Doran that this amiable cooperation had come about. And with that smile, which had won him many friends and, perhaps, his first election, "The commissioner knows his way about, Ramsey. He can be sure your philosophy is not, 'It is better to give than to receive.' You're a hard man, Inspector."

Ramsey straightened his broad shoulders, grinned. "I've been over twenty years in harness." He nodded vigorously. "But this stuff of Brown's gets me; the sneering smile on his face—as if he were laughing at me."

Mortimer Doran looked long and earnestly at Vee Brown. The cigarette had straightened; the smile on Brown's lips was pleasant, almost whimsical. Doran shook his head. "I can't see it," he said.

I smiled. Brown smiled. But Inspector Ramsey's face remained hard and grim.

"Brown," he said, "is a seeker after the sensational. I daresay I've completed a dozen cases for every one he's appeared in. But I'm just a cop; I haven't got color. I haven't got the faculty for backing a wanted murderer into a corner and shooting him to death and making it look like self-defense. Nor—" he looked at me—"have I got a friend whose former connection with the *Morning Globe* makes it possible to glorify, for a morbid public, legalized murder."

Mortimer Doran took to pacing the room again and Brown's cigarette sagged,

and that whole expression of derision returned.

"And now, Mr. Doran"—Ramsey's voice had raised—"you bring me here to listen to the strangest of all Brown's stories. A wholesale murder society! Damn it sir, it's too much!"

Vee Brown leaned far back in the comfortable chair, drummed together those long delicate fingers that could pick out on the piano the popular songs that had made him famous under the unknown alias of "Vivian," and could just as adroitly close upon the trigger of a gun and bring instant death to the one who faced that gun.

"It's a wonder," Brown finally said, "that you haven't accused me of laying out these bodies, just for the mystery of the thing." Then turning to Mortimer Doran, "I'll go over the whole thing again, make my suggestion and let you decide."

Vee Brown held up his right hand.

"Three men were killed without apparent motive. Drake, Henderson, and Warren. A wait of a day or two—and then Frank Morris, the broker. And we found a motive there. He had drawn fifty thousand dollars from the bank. His death led us to George V. Rensiller, who was on the verge of stepping out on the city streets to deliver fifty thousand dollars into the hands of an agent of this Murder Syndicate. I prevented that, talked to Mr. Rensiller, and discovered the following facts—

"A new racket had come with Repeal. This new racket to gorge the public, or certain of the wealthy public, seemed complicated but proved quite simple. A man was notified that if he did not pay over a certain sum of money he would die, that if he went to the police he would be murdered. Some, no doubt, paid; some did not. But this organization had a method to convince the skeptical. They

sent along with the demand for money a list of others who were so taxed. Drake and Henderson and Warren were on the list that Rensiller received. He ignored the demand in the beginning, then his morning newspapers called to his attention that these men had died. A note from the Murder Syndicate told him they died because they did not pay, and it reminded him that his remittance was now due. I have no way of knowing that others received the same demand and the final message of death, but I imagine that there were others, and that several paid—and that some perhaps died."

"But Drake and Henderson and Warren had no money," Doran objected.

BROWN shook his head. "No. Nor did they receive any threats. They were simply props. Since they received no threats of death, they were easy victims for this organization. And their deaths served the desired purpose. It threw fear, terror—the certainty of death, perhaps—into the minds of the intended paying customers. The slogan of the Murder Syndicate is—'Pay or Die.' Simple but effective."

"But this Rensiller?"

"Ah!" Brown straightened in his chair. "I prevented his murder and got the whole story from him. He's our only witness, and he has fled—gone abroad."

"But," said Ramsey, looking more at Mortimer Doran than at Vee Brown, "Brown himself said that the whole murder society would collapse if Rensiller lived, since the head of this organization had notified his prospective clients"—this last with a sneer—"that Rensiller would die."

"Certainly," Vee nodded, "I said that. And it did hurt them for a time. But they had the opportunities in this new racket. They started in to build up where they left off. The apparent suicide from the

Manhattan bridge only last Tuesday, the man stabbed in mid-town; the body floating at the foot of the pier at the Battery—"

"Hell!" said Ramsey. "All identified, yes—and none worth a dime. The dive from the Manhattan bridge was a suicide and—"

"He could have been hurled from the bridge," Brown objected.

"But—no motive!"

"No apparent motive for murder, and therefore the biggest motive of all. These murders were all props; all to build up fear in others—others, who were notified that they must pay or die."

"Well," said Doran, "we're doing all we can, Vee. There was nothing to stop Renssler from fleeing the country. We'll do our best to bring him back, and get his evidence."

"God!" said Brown, "I'm not asking for that; I'm not even suggesting that. I can see no sense in that. His testimony, his letters from this Murder Syndicate are worth nothing."

"They're worth this," Ramsey shot in. "We have only your unsubstantiated statement that he received such threats and—"

"Hell!" snapped Brown, "I'm only suggesting that you give my information to the papers, requesting that anyone receiving such a threat of death, signed by the Murder Syndicate, communicate with the police at once."

Ramsey threw back his head and laughed. "An official ad, so to speak. Are you threatened with murder? Why take time from your business to attend to it yourself? The police are your police. Your money pays for—"

Mortimer Doran spoke. "Why put it in the papers? Why unnecessarily alarm the people? And why bring such notice and much criticism to the police department and my office? Why?"

"Why? Because several people in the city at this time are receiving slips of paper with the names of victims on them. I would like to know whose names are on that list. I know that we are about to have a real murder; a big murder; a particularly brutal murder. And I think the victim will be a well known man. The Murder Syndicate is about to strike a devastating blow. They are going to murder a man whose murder will frighten others into paying their demands. The psychology of the thing is simple. The intended victim simply says, 'If they were able to get So-and-so, what chance have I got?' and he will pay. A dozen—maybe hundreds—will pay."

"But surely if such a thing should happen, some one of these people will come to the police and—"

"Yes." Vee nodded. "Certainly someone will come to the police after the murder of a very prominent man. But we want them to come first. We want to see the list they have received. We want to prevent murder, not simply punish the murderer. We don't want to fight against a sudden reign of terror; we want to prevent it."

"But we don't know that any such man is to be murdered. . . . I know, Vee! You say you feel it; that—"

"I know it!" said Brown. "But I don't know his name. Poor devil! Undoubtedly an upright citizen, a respected citizen, a well known citizen. Since he will receive no threats he will seek no protection. He—"

But Brown's talk was all useless. Mortimer Doran simply shook his head and said he'd give thought to the thing. Ramsey openly scoffed. As for me! Well, I was always for Brown. But the newspaper notoriety that he sought seemed to me, looking at it from the official viewpoint, just a bit silly. As a newspaperman, if my few stories about Vee can so

rate me, well—I could see the news value of it as a story; as a story coming, as it would be, from such official and high source as the district attorney himself.

ON the way back to our own penthouse atop one of Park Avenue's most pretentious apartment houses, leased in my name and paid for out of Brown's enormous income from popular song hits, Brown talked, or half thought aloud.

"So simple and so effective," he mused. "The man who thought it up is a genius, Dean. Think of it! He has only to find a victim, send him the demand and notify any one of a hundred or more killers in the city that he wishes a certain man murdered. Why, the killers themselves don't even know why they kill, or for whom they kill."

"Then it will be impossible to reach him—get him."

"Not impossible." Vee shook his head. "He must have some close associates, to pick his murderers or at least notify them, and also someone to collect the money. Sam Clausen, whom we eliminated, was such an associate. There must be others; or at least one other, who knows this leader."

"But we have nothing to go on, nothing to—"

"No? You forget, Dean. Ida Trent, the girl Clausen murdered! He killed her before she could give us the information that would have electrocuted Clausen, but not before she told us that she was the one who passed along the notes; the death notes with the name of the intended victim and the price paid for his murder to—" He paused, looked at me. "Don't you remember, Dean?"

"To be sure!" I said. "Ulrich Rossimire, the jeweler."

"Exactly! I have had him—or rather, he is being well watched."

"Detectives from headquarters?"

Brown shook his head.

"Private dicks then?"

Again Brown shook his head.

I frowned, set my lips. Then my eyes widened; my lips parted. "Not Gertrude la Palatin?"

"Exactly!" Vee nodded. "Gertrude la Palatin."

"But I thought you weren't going to permit her to endanger herself by—"

"My dear Dean, the word 'permit' does not fit in with Pal. She will either work alone against this Murder Syndicate, or with me. That she is peculiarly fitted for the job, no one can doubt. She was of the underworld; has been in jail; rose from the chorus to be the world's greatest impersonator—which reminds me that I must get on with the words and music for her next revue." He poked me in the ribs, then grinned at me. "She is a woman without a single weakness."

I nodded at that. "She asked me to convince you, Vee, since the whole revue will hinge on mystery, that you should write the book for it and that I should collaborate with you."

Vee Brown smiled—that twisted little grimace. "That," he said, "is the weakness that proves the exception to the rule."

PAL was at our apartment. Not the Girl of the Night that she had been when we first met her in the cat-man case, and that she had been when she wormed herself into the confidence of the dead Ida Trent. Now, without any disguise, she was simply her glorious self. The slim little red-headed star that Broadway knew so well.

Brown scowled. "You're mad, to come here, Pal—at least, as yourself. There is no doubt now, since I prevented the Renssiller extortion and probable murder, that the head of this Murder Syndicate knows I am after him."

She came to her feet, stood almost shoulder to shoulder with Brown. Two slender wiry bodies, bundles of dynamic energy, green eyes looking into black. But she ignored his caution.

"What did Mortimer Doran say?"

"What any sensible man would say whose office is held at the will of the public. 'Nothing doing!' Don't you see, Pal? You may be followed, leaving here, and suspected when you change from yourself to Myra—Girl of the Night."

She laughed. "Changing character is as easy for me as for a chameleon. But I'm not changing it at present. Guess who I had dinner with tonight"

Brown shrugged.

"Ulrich Rossimire." She evidently liked the expression on Vee's face, for her eyes twinkled. "Yes, as Gertrude la Palatin! And don't look so shocked. There was nothing suspicious about it. He asked for the favor; has admired me for years on the stage. I didn't like the 'for years' part—but then, he's not a tactful man with women."

"He suspects you? Your friendship with me? Tried to pump you?"

"You're wrong in two out of the three guesses. He doesn't suspect me. But he knows of my friendship with you. And he didn't try to pump me. Rather, he was the type I had to tolerate in my chorus days; liked to talk about himself. But he was interested in you."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Your treatment of criminals! He wondered if your accomplishments didn't really come through stool-pigeons—informers, he called them. And if you protected those informers, and to what extent!"

Vee nodded slowly. "He admired you for years and told you so, and—"

"And—" she encouraged. And when Brown didn't go on, "He didn't make love to me, if that's what you mean. He's a

worried man, Vee. The depression didn't treat him kindly. I imagine, when he had the shop on Fifth Avenue, he wasn't above smuggling in stones. But I don't think he ever handled hot stuff, as he does now in his smaller shop. When he was in the big money he liked the bright lights and the bubble water. Now he drinks more as a business than as a pleasure; with a set determination, and it doesn't effect him at all—at least, outwardly."

"You think he's ripe to talk?"

"No." She shook her head. "But I think he could be ripened. I don't think he knows we suspect him."

"Why did he seek you out then?"

"Well," she pouted slightly, "men have sought me out before, and—"

"But this would be too much of a coincidence, at this time."

"Maybe." She nodded. "It's not flattering, Vee, but I think he sought me to find out something about you—for the future. He's a worried man but he's a shrewd man, a man who would do most anything to regain his lost fortune. The depression is over; his business is picking up. He's talking of a Fifth Avenue shop again."

"Should I see him?"

SHE thought a moment, then said with decision: "No. I think he's in a position to be scared definitely one way or the other. Don't chance scaring him the other way. Now—big things are going to break, and they are going to break Wednesday night between the hours of seven and—say, two o'clock Thursday morning. I want you to try the police again. If they won't act through the newspapers, at least see that the big men in the city have protection."

Brown whistled. "The city is just lousy with big men, Pal. Such a suggestion would be ridiculous as well as impossible."

He went to the phone, called Mortimer Doran's number, then suddenly changed his mind and a minute later was speaking to Inspector Ramsey. "You can suit yourself about the publicity, Ramsey," Brown was saying, "but I have every reason to believe that a prominent citizen is to be murdered between the hours of seven Wednesday night and two o'clock Thursday morning. . . . No, no. I'm not psychic and I can't set it to the minute for you. I don't know his name, don't know the place, don't know the method of the murderer. But I do know it's the Murder Syndicate and that the buck is now passed to you." A moment's pause; then, "No, I don't expect you to do anything. I never have expected you to do anything and I daresay I never will expect you—"

Vee Brown clamped down the receiver. He laughed lightly.

"After all, Mortimer Doran could do nothing. He's my boss, so I passed the buck to Ramsey. He was sarcastic, laughed at me; but I know he'll be running up and down the city in a high-powered car between the hours of seven o'clock Wednesday night and two A. M. Thursday. Now, Pal—how about the information?"

"Ulrich Rossimire is set on an alibi for that night. I have a date with him. To be assured that I would not disappoint him he has played on my cupidity; says that after the theater he will show me a ring that I may have at a price that will astound me. There, don't look so shocked, Vee. I'm positive he doesn't know who the victim is to be, nor could he give you any information that will stop it."

"And your only information came from Ida Trent, before she died. Information that this Murder Syndicate would stage a killing that would startle the nation and net the syndicate thousands—hundreds of thousands!"

"Exactly that." She nodded. "No one

can prevent it now. We can only hope that through this death we may find the brain that directs this Murder Syndicate."

Vee shook his head. "He is clever—very clever. It is all so simple. It seems strange to me that someone—someone who is threatened—does not talk. So we must wait—simply wait for a man to die that others may live. Waiting! Waiting for—" He stopped suddenly, raised his hand and waved it slowly in the air. He was humming softly "Come, Pal!" He grabbed her hand and half dragged her to the music room. "It'll be just the thing for you in that court-room scene of the revue, when you're waiting for the jury to—"

The music-room door closed behind them. A moment of silence—the notes of the piano—and that low throaty voice of Gertrude la Palatin.

CHAPTER TWO

The Syndicate Strikes

FOR a long time that Wednesday night Vee Brown smoked in silence. I wanted to talk. I did talk. Brown frowned as the police calls came over the radio.

"A nice state of affairs!" I finally exploded. "The thing doesn't seem possible. Some place in the city tonight a man—a prominent man—sits and waits for death."

"Let us hope that at some future time we can say the same thing about the leader of this Murder Syndicate, who kills tonight," Brown said. "His victim, Dean, is spared the knowledge of his death. I feel sure of that. But after tonight—what? A prominent man murdered; other men threatened with the same death if they do not pay. Those are the men who must suffer. Those are the men who must sit and wonder if they will be the next to die. They will remember; and if

their love of money is not greater than their love of life, they will pay. . . . Why not shut off that damned radio?"

"I hoped something might come in that—"

"Nothing can come to us quicker than Mortimer Doran's message. We can be at the place almost as soon as the body is found; unless, of course, Ramsey holds things up to give him a chance to beat me to—"

The radio roared in. I raised my voice. "You're sure, Vee—so sure of death tonight."

"It's in the air" He smiled grimly. "And that's not just an expression, Dean; it's the truth. It's in the night, in the underworld. Every big-time crook in the city knows it, feels it—feels that something big is about to happen. They're uncanny that way. Just a whisper warns them. Some have left the city; some have sought respectable alibis—like Ros-simire, for instance." He smiled. "But no crook worth his salt will pull any job tonight or be unable to account for his time, every minute of it up to two o'clock tomorrow morning. Be sure of that!"

Twelve—twelve fifteen—almost one o'clock. The police calls ground on. I knew the code. Family trouble; a hold-up in a cigar store; several drunks making disturbances; a prowler trying to break into a house; a—

I jarred erect. Brown had come up-right in his chair; his raised hand stopped my question. He was listening to a police message.

Before the voice had died away he was on the phone. I heard his quick questions after he got the police.

"Come! Dean." He banged up the receiver. "We may beat Ramsey to it yet. Someone telephoned in that a light was seen in the closed house of Ludwig Loudon, on Fifth Avenue. I can't be sure, of

course, but I guess that's it. Yes, that must be it."

"But what has that got to do with it?"

I was following him from the apartment.

"You know who he is!" Brown looked at me.

"Certainly. Everybody knows who he is. President of The Century Harvester Company and one of the most socially prominent—The papers said he was at Palm Beach."

We were in the automatic elevator when he answered me. "Maybe he is. But what sort of crook would be prowling a house on Fifth Avenue with a flashlight, so that a passerby would telephone the police? Why wouldn't the passerby notify the police on the avenue; there must be plenty of them, and—"

"What—who do you think is in the house?"

"I don't think anyone is in the house," Brown said as we grabbed a taxi. "At least, any living person. A dollar extra for speed!" This to the driver as we swung over to Fifth Avenue.

THREE or four police cars were already at the curb when we reached the house. A big car screeched to the sidewalk behind us. Brown looked back once, tossed a couple of bills to the driver and flung open the door.

"We're a full second ahead of Ramsey anyway," he cried. "Come on Dean!"

Lights were ablaze in the big house; little knots of people were already gathering on the sidewalk. I dashed up the steps at Brown's heels, heard him say something to the two uniformed policemen at the door, and was in the huge hall behind him. No use to go farther; my heels just anchored right there, scraped to a forced stop, then jarred forward again as a big body rammed against mine. I didn't have to turn to know who had run into me; Ramsey's sudden curse told

me that. And I couldn't turn. I was fascinated at the sight—the sight there at the end of the hall, under the light. Yes, a light that hung above a huge black picture frame. A frame that had once held a picture, and now—

The frame held something all right. It held a man—the body of a man. A man whose hands and feet had been nailed to that wall. A crucified body. A dead body whose head hung down upon its chest, but whose eyes seemed to look out—look straight into mine—glassily, sightlessly, straight into mine. Across his chest great letters seemed to dance before my eyes.

I know Ramsey passed me; that Mortimer Doran's breath whistled far back in his throat; that a young policeman who had just come in the door was violently sick. Then I saw Ramsey stretch up and raise the head—the dead man's head. And I heard Brown say: "There isn't a bit of doubt about it. It's Ludwig Loudon."

"This—this is what you were waiting for?" It was Mortimer Doran who put the question to Vee hardly above a whisper.

"This," said Brown, "is what we were all waiting for. The papers—" He paused, but we all understood. Cleary, of the *News*, was there. His face was ghastly white in the light. His lips twisted slightly, and in the silence he read aloud the words from the huge placard across the dead man's chest; suspended there by a string looped around the neck of the body. He read slowly, pronouncing each word distinctly—individually.

"The Murder Syndicate."

Yes, the words were there all right. I had seen them before. That is, seen a haze of huge letters that seemed to dance. Now that my heart had quieted somewhat and my vision grew clearer, I made out the words.

After the first shock things moved with the usual rapid and expert precision of

the New York police. Lights flashed; cameras clicked; everything was gone over for fingerprints, even the heavy nail-like spikes through the hands and feet were carefully examined.

One thing was strangely missing from the entire proceedings. The light banter; the businesslike air of indifference to tragic death. Oh, the businesslike part of it was there all right; but the callous indifference gone entirely. Everyone was grim, determined. It was a brutal, gruesome murder; even an awe-inspiring one, if that's the word I mean. And the men worked in hushed silence.

I don't know what put it into Cleary's head to ask Ramsey the question he did, or maybe it was a perfectly innocent question and both Ramsey and myself misunderstood it. Cleary asked: "God! Inspector, you didn't expect anything like this, did you?"

"Expect it!" Ramsey whirled on him almost viciously. Then, "No, no. I don't believe that Vee Brown himself expected it."

Cleary seemed startled for a minute, then no doubt remembered the animosity between Brown and Ramsey. He smiled sort of weakly.

Men searched that house from cellar to garret, but there were no clues; there so seldom are. The house had been closed for some weeks.

Ramsey said to Brown: "Well, it happened. You called the turn all right. I hope you're satisfied."

"Good Lord!" said Vee, "you'd think I wanted it. Well, you'll get plenty of that newspaper notoriety you didn't seek a day or two ago. But the brutality of it! To pick a man like Loudon; to torture him to death to influence others! It's hellish!"

I, too, followed the young policeman out to the street just as the medical examiner bustled into the hall. Maybe I noted with some satisfaction that the customary

cheerful greeting of the dapper little doctor wasn't present, and the usual grin of smug assurance was wiped off his face as if you'd drawn a rag across it the moment he saw the body. The movies notwithstanding, even a medical examiner has a stomach; a stomach that sometimes shows on his face.

IT WAS almost four o'clock when Brown came home and dropped onto the couch beside me, lifting the drink I handed him.

"It's not quite as bad as it looked, Dean. The doctor found that Ludwig Loudon was killed with a knife, once through the left lung and once through the heart. Either thrust would have caused death. Yes that's right." He guessed my question and forestalled it. "He was nailed to the wall after he was dead. Don't ask me how, but medical science has a way of determining absolutely the cause of death. The nailing to the wall was purely for the effect on others." His grin was rather weak. "High pressure salesmanship!"

"But why so terrible? Why—why at all?"

"The Murder Syndicate" said Brown, "has decided to come into the open. It was inevitable anyway, so why sneak slowly, uncertainly, and perhaps half believably into print? Have you any idea just what it would cost to run an advertisement across the front page of every paper in the country, even if money could buy such a display? Figure, then, the value of this advertisement; figure the weight it will carry with prospective victims of the Murder Syndicate."

"Was Ludwig Loudon threatened? Any letters found?"

"No letters. Nothing! I don't think he received any. He was the type who would have gone straight to the police. We got Loudon's wife on long distance at Palm

Beach. Loudon arrived at the Pennsylvania Station yesterday afternoon. He didn't want his presence in the city known; it was a matter of business and he intended to return at once. She was rather incoherent, for the police system is brutally efficient in notifying relatives of death. But the story is simple enough. He was lured or forced into a car or taxicab, taken some place and killed, then brought to his own house. He was, according to his wife, in the best of health and spirits; annoyed slightly by having to take such a hurried trip to New York. But he had not received any threats of any kind." Brown's shoulders moved slightly. "No doubt he was selected as a victim because of his intended secret visit to the city. But it would be simple to learn of his arrangements."

"Have the police—"

"There is no further interest in Loudon—at least, for us," Vee snapped. "The thing was inevitable, but the man is dead. I know it sounds brutal, Dean, but it is the living who must be protected now." And when I just looked at him, "Of course everything will be done to bring the murderer of Loudon to justice, but don't you see the real magnitude of the thing? The defiance of the authorities, the reign of terror that will follow. Many murders, perhaps—of prominent citizens too. We can protect only those who come to us for protection. Others— A machine gun hidden behind the curtains of a speeding car; the crack of a rifle from a window several stories above the street; a gun in a man's back in the darkness of the night. Murder, Dean, is the simplest crime and the easiest to commit."

"Just what, Vee, will be the result of this—this outrage?"

Vee Brown came to his feet, stretched his hands above his head, yawned once, finally said: "All hell will break loose in the city tomorrow. Be sure of that!"

CHAPTER THREE

Cop Killers

AND all hell did break loose. There was no doubt about that. The papers screamed the news; nor did they spare the stomachs of their readers.

CRUCIFIED BY MURDER SYNDICATE
MURDER FIEND STALKS THE CITY

Only well down in the column could be found the fact that Ludwig Loudon was dead before he was nailed into that enormous picture frame. Ramsey had not talked to the press; Mortimer Doran had not talked to the press; nor had Vee Brown. For none of the papers printed the real reason for Loudon's death.

We had a visitor. He was a small quiet man, well into the fifties, with soft gray eyes and a flatty chin.

"I don't suppose you know me, Mr. Brown."

Vee smiled pleasantly. "No, I don't."

The man presented his card. His name was Philip J. Jennings and he was the owner of a Fifth Avenue shop.

"I daresay, if you were a married man you'd know my establishment. Most women—that is, discriminating women—patronize—"

"Surely," said Brown, but his voice was pleasant, "you're not going to give me a sales talk on ladies' garments!"

The little man reddened slightly. "No, no!" he said hurriedly. "Up to—well, a few days ago I never had a care in the world. I worked my way—without schooling, understand—from a—a— But, here!" He unfolded the newspaper in his hand and pointed to the streamer across the top. "Is that true?"

"Quite true."

The red left the man's face; yellow blotches showed on the white skin.

"Mr. Brown," he said, "I know the reason that man died. God! I hope you'll respect my confidence. I paced the floor for hours before I decided to come to the police—to you. I earned my money—earned it hard. But I could pay—I could pay in time." Fat fingers trembled as he extended the envelope to Vee. "God! I don't want to die like that—like Loudon died."

Brown didn't speak. He opened the envelope, took out the note, read it, looked closely at the envelope, then handed both to me. I read the note.

Your time of payment is near. Ludwig Loudon did not meet his payments. His body will be discovered at one o'clock tomorrow morning—Thursday—in his own house on Fifth Avenue. He made the mistake of notifying the police.

It will not be a pleasant death. Isn't fifty thousand dollars a fair price to avoid such an end?

Instructions will follow.

THE MURDER SYNDICATE.

P. S. Note post mark of envelope.

I looked at the envelope. The letter had been received and stamped at the post office at eight thirty Wednesday night.

"So—" Brown looked over at me. "We know now, Dean, why no one was a good enough citizen to notify the police before the murder. The letter arrived in the first mail this morning. But the post mark convinces us and each victim, that the plans of the Murder Syndicate went through as scheduled. The letter was dropped in the box some four—maybe five hours—before the body was found."

"Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown." Philip Jennings was pleading. "If they—if these people could take and kill a man of such importance as Ludwig Loudon, what possible chance is there for me? It wasn't the money that made me come. It was—was the way this man had died; because—well, I want to be a good citizen."

VEE BROWN looked at the man a long time. His eyes were hard, his thin lips grim. Finally his eyes brightened, his lips parted.

"By God! Mr. Jennings, I believe you do." Both Vee's hands came down on the man's shoulders. "And, damn it, you're right! From now on you have nothing to fear. I promise you absolute protection."

"But, Loudon. It says on the note that he went to the police, and—and he's dead. I have a wife and daughter, Betty, who—"

Brown shook his shoulders gently. "Ludwig Loudon never went to the police. He was never even threatened. This letter—his death—it is all to frighten other people and shake their confidence in the police. Now—I appreciate your coming to me, your confidence, your fine civic spirit. But why did you wait? Why didn't you come to me sooner? You had earlier letters, certainly."

The red cut through the white in Jennings' face. His head came forward. "Earlier letters, yes. But they were hints—nothing of any account, you understand—and I didn't exactly believe the threat, you see. As a matter of fact, some time back I attended a convention in Philadelphia—and there was a young woman. But that's past, now."

"I see," said Brown. "They hinted at that, hinted at disclosing that to your wife, eh? And you preferred death."

"Death? No." Eyes widened. "I took the blackmail more or less seriously but thought it would finally come down to a few dollars. The death threat—the Murder Syndicate! Well, it seemed rather absurd until this morning."

The phone rang. It was Mortimer Doran. His voice was excited. He wanted to talk to Brown.

Vee excused himself. Perhaps five minutes later he returned.

"You have company, Mr. Jennings."

And to me, "Loudon's death brought out ten good citizens—at least, good and frightened citizens. Ramsey is bringing one of them to see me. He appears helpful."

"Others. Others!" The round-faced little Jennings swayed on his feet, tottered toward Vee. I grabbed his arm—and just like that he went to pieces. "I don't want to die. Not like that—not nailed to a wall—not like that—not like that!" he cried over and over.

Brown led him to a chair, listened to his sobbing plea to save his life; his regret—for he had the money, could have paid it. And then his sudden straightening, the gulping of the whisky in hands that shook violently, despite his determined chin.

"It isn't right. It isn't right. Loudon—killed like that. I must do the right thing; I have done the right thing. My wife—my daughter!" And he was off again about dying.

Brown looked down at him. "You came to me, Mr. Jennings, because you had faith in me. There! Nothing will happen to you. I give you my word on that."

Little eyes widened, brightened. The man clutched at Brown's hand, held it tightly. "I'm just a coward," he muttered. "I've never had to face anything like this. I'm just a coward."

"No." Brown shook his head. "You don't know it, Mr. Jennings, but you're a very brave man."

Just at that moment the doorbell rang. I followed Vee into the foyer.

"That will be Ramsey with the other victim. Now—why did Ramsey bring him to me?"

"Jennings!" I said. "Why kid him like that? Why—he's terror-stricken, and you told him he was a very brave man."

Brown looked straight at me. "He's one of the bravest men I've ever met."

THERE was no smile on Vee's lips, no derision in the cigarette that stuck straight out in his mouth. "You and I, Dean, don't know fear, terror, as that man pictures it. Why—the soldiers at the Front who waited eagerly for the zero hour, to dash over the top, were not as brave as the men who crouched shivering in the trenches. When you're not afraid it's easy to face danger. It's those who know terror, yet face it, who are brave. This man, Jennings, would give his last nickel to save himself pain, physical violence. The thought of it grips him with an indescribable terror; his whole body cries out to pay. But his duty, his conscience, his sense of right sent him to me—sent him to attack the thing he feared most. He is a braver man than you and I ever will be, for we will never know his terror." Brown's hand was on the door-knob now. "Perhaps it will help both these intended victims to meet. Misery, you know— But let us see what Victim Number Two looks like."

Brown threw open the door. Ramsey and another man were there. The man was as big as Ramsey but much younger, though fast living showed in his face. And his face was familiar.

"Teddy Melrose!" Ramsey introduced the man and grinned.

Teddy Melrose swung his cane over a gray-coated arm, removed his yellow gloves and shook hands with Brown. Despite the fishlike film over his eyes they flashed when his lips parted and he smiled. I knew the man. The millionaire playboy of a few years back. The man whose address was well known in every night club in New York City; who knew every stockbroker, every banker—yes, and every racketeer of note—by his first name. But the crash had wiped him out; his friends were gone. He had faded away from things in the city and had been reported in the society columns as living

very frugally on the few dollars allowance his old aunt, one of the wealthiest women in America, allowed him; allowed him as long as he stayed out of trouble.

Brown introduced him to Jennings. Melrose laughed as he patted the little man on the back. "Buck up!" he said. "I know Vee Brown; that's why I insisted on being brought here." And as the little man's hand trembled in his own, "Hell! You've got nothing to worry you. Look at me. I couldn't pay if I wanted to. But we're not nailed up in any frame yet."

Jennings shook violently as he half sat, half fell back in the chair.

Ramsey said: "There are a couple of cops downstairs I brought along with me. They can see Mr. Jennings home, or to the shop. You asked Doran for a guard."

Brown paused by the living-room door. "Just plain flat-feet?" He hesitated. "I—"

"Doran sent Maloney and Curran down to Jennings' store," said Ramsey. "They're to meet Jennings there. And listen here, Brown. We've had ten men come in with threatening letters. They all need protection as much as this man Jennings. Men like Maloney and Curran can't be spared for—"

But Vee took Jennings from the apartment. The door slammed behind them. When he returned some five minutes later he scowled.

"I should have gone with him. Curran and Maloney are all right, but those two cops! Why—they're just cops."

"Cripes!" said Ramsey. "That guy comes to you, and you want the whole police force out to guard him. What about the other men? A couple of well known names, too."

"And what about me?" Teddy Melrose helped himself to a hooker of Scotch.

"Yes." Vee looked at him. "What about you? You don't seem to take this thing very seriously."

TEDDY MELROSE set his glass down with a bang. "Oh, no? Well—I don't know about that man, Jennings, but I'm on the preferred list. I must pay tonight."

"And he's willing to help the police," Ramsey shot in.

Brown looked at Melrose. "So you're willing to help the police! Why? You haven't a lady friend in Philadelphia, have you?"

"Not in Philadelphia." Teddy Melrose laughed. "Look here! The cops gave me many a break in my day. I guess I just want to return the favor. You know me, Ramsey. Big-hearted Teddy, they called me. Now—"

"Now," said Brown, "how far are you willing to go?"

Ramsey cut in. "Teddy came straight to headquarters, but he insisted on seeing you. And he's willing to go all the way."

"All the way, if Mr. Brown runs the show," Melrose corrected. "I've heard about you, Brown, and I like your methods."

"Big-hearted Teddy, eh?" Voe grinned, but it was not a pleasant grin. "You can't pay fifty thousand, yet they picked you. Why? And just why are you willing to help?"

"Hell!" said Melrose. "I can't pay and that's a fact. They must think I can. It comes at a bad time, too. The old girl has just started to loosen up, and I like the bright spots. Do you know, Brown—the aunt's worth a cool ten million. That's a lot of jack."

"If she died—it would come to you, eh?"

Melrose shook his head.

"Not now, it wouldn't. But if she lives long enough she might change her mind. Ten million! Think of it. And this lousy Murder Syndicate could drop her a line about a dame here in New York—a couple, maybe. I'd lose my allowance." His face hardened; soft blue eyes became

mean, cruel. "I like life. I like money. I had it and know what it means. I stood on my own two feet and took it and gave it. No lousy Murder Syndicate is going to knock ten millions from under me and not pay for it. I don't want to be nailed up to any wall. I don't want to die. But I do want that ten million and will go a long way to get it."

"Big-hearted Teddy, eh?" Brown was still grinning.

Ramsey patted the man on the back. "You've got guts, boy!" he said.

Teddy Melrose's lips set tightly. "If you once had money you'd know what it is to lose it. I've got a little investment job now, working from a big house. It's hard, but things are picking up—and my aunt likes it." He straightened somewhat. "Gentlemen—just as I told Mr. Doran, I'm not here asking protection. I'm here offering my services to trap the head of this Murder Syndicate."

"You're not afraid of death then."

"Hell!" said Melrose. "They can't kill all the crowd who go to the police. It's you and Ramsey and me and the Murder Syndicate. We all want the same thing—money. My stake is high."

"Very high." Brown nodded. "Now—the letter you got!"

It was Ramsey who handed Brown the letter. It was typewritten the same as Jennings' was and the beginning worded about the same, but there was another note attached and this gave directions for paying the money that night. It was rather complicated, but a second reading made it clear enough. To me, it was much the same as George V. Rensiller's instructions had been. The lonely stretch of road beside the golf links at Van Cortland Park; but this time the money was to be delivered at night. Tonight! At least, at one o'clock tomorrow morning.

"It looks good." Ramsey rubbed his hands. "As I see it, we simply lie there

—there's a bank and thick bush above the road—and grab the guys when they take the money. It's simple."

"Very simple. Too simple, maybe." Brown scratched his chin.

"But," Teddy Melrose objected, "I don't mind driving out there alone and delivering the package of money—fake money, unless the city cares to supply the real thing." He grinned. "But the thing is—well, I know something about these big racketeers and it's a cinch it's a big one behind this show, and it isn't apt to be the leader who will receive the money."

RAMSEY grinned. "Never mind that. We'll have a way of making them talk. They'll have to take the money to the leader, and we'll make the trip with them."

"Can you make such men talk?"

"I can try." Ramsey's grin was not pleasant. "Yep, I can try—or I can promise them freedom for talking."

"This," said Brown, "is a particularly revolting murder case. I doubt that immunity could be given the ones who receive the money. They might be directly responsible for the murder. I don't think you could grant immunity and—"

"I didn't say 'grant it.'" Ramsey laughed. "I said 'promise it.' It would be up to them to find out the difference later. You and me, Brown, should work it out alone." And when I would have objected, "And your private yes-man, of course." "Sure!" said Vee. "All but the promise."

"And remember, Vee Brown, no working this on your own and trying to leave me out in the cold. I'll—"

Ramsey paused. The phone rang. I lifted it.

"For you, Inspector," I told him.

Ramsey swung to the phone.

"Yeah. Inspector Ramsey. . . . O. K., Willie—let's have it." A moment's pause,

and the efficient assurance went out of his voice. "God!" he said. "Two cops shot to death—Mitchel and Bombastia." Ramsey's voice was hushed, awed. "Yeah, yeah! A witness saw a lad put in a black car. . . . Sure—sure. Of course. I know. The guy that was kidnaped was named Philip J. Jennings." And shaking himself free as Brown crossed the room and tried to grab the phone from his hand, "Yeah. Mitchell is still alive. May be conscious again; may not. . . . Damn it, Brown, lay off me! . . . Sure! We'll be over to the hospital."

Ramsey banged down the receiver, turned on Brown. "Philip J. Jennings has been snatched. Came to you, did he? Confidence in you. Gave him your protection, eh?"

Vee said simply: "He wasn't killed then. Just what happened?"

"Two lads simply stepped up, one on either side of the taxi, and fired without warning. You tell—" And suddenly, "Two cops—two damn good cops! Two of my boys. They didn't have a chance. I—" He was slamming toward the door, Brown at his heels. I, too, was grabbing my hat and coat.

Ramsey stopped, turned; snapped: "Wait! What about him? Melrose—protection."

The smile on Melrose's face was not pleasant but it was expressive. The words he spoke as he followed us to the hall were unnecessary.

"I don't think I want protection—now." But downstairs he said to Ramsey before we departed: "You know where to find me and how to make arrangements; that is, if you're still interested in me."

"Still interested!" Brown's voice cracked in his throat. "If things go through as planned tonight, Ramsey won't need any promises to make men talk. I'll attend to that."

I thought of Sam Clausen, who had

died through Brown. I thought, too, though no one else knew it, that the head of the Murder Syndicate had struck—struck, and made his next victim the man who had sought protection from Brown. Was it both vengeance and—

I had to run to reach the taxi and climb in between Brown and Ramsey before the door slammed in my face.

Through the window I saw Teddy Melrose. He was standing far back in the shadow of the entrance court. He didn't wish to be seen with us—with Brown. And somehow I didn't blame him. Was the grin on his face just supercilious or was it the indifferent grin of the fatalist? I knew what it was to have money and lose it but I didn't think, even to regain it, that I would want to be driving that car alone tonight up in a deserted section of Van Cortland Park.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Irons in the Fire

WE made the hospital, ignored the elevator and pounded up the stairs. The nurse stopped us at the door.

"It'll only be minutes," she said. "We don't know for sure, but the doctor thinks there's six bullets in his body."

Hushed silence then. We entered the room. The white-coated, bald-headed surgeon turned from the bed.

"He can talk," he said slowly. "Not much—and it won't be long." Then raising his voice, "Here's some people come to see you. Come, boy, wake up now! They're going to make it right."

The white face on the bed turned. It was a very young face. Colorless lips spoke.

"I got my checks, eh, Inspector?" The lower lip dropped down in what was meant for a smile; a tongue came out and licked at dry lips. "Six of them. Six of them right in the stomach. Six of them,

and I looked right into his face. It was Leo Kranz. He was big; the other lad short."

"Kranz. Kranz! Leo Kranz. Why, he's— Hell! It couldn't be Kranz, boy." Ramsey was doubtful, looked at the doctor.

The doctor nodded, said: "He knows what he's saying. Anyway—what he wants to say."

The man on the bed raised his voice; his eyes seemed to jump out of his head. "I marked him." He fairly hollered the words. "I marked him with every jar, right in my belly. 'Kranz!' I said. 'Kranz. Kranz. Kranz! Kra—'"

He didn't speak any more. The nurse came in and put the sheet over his face. Funny, how you act. I think I muttered some kind of a prayer. I know that Ramsey cursed.

Brown just looked down at the sheet, the outline beneath it, and said slowly: "Six of them right in the belly, eh? I'll remember that."

Then we turned and left the hospital. At the foot of the steps we paused. A white-haired plain-clothes man was talking in a fast low voice.

"They just stepped on the side of the car, one on each side—a big guy and a little one—and shot them to death without a word. A dozen people saw it, saw them kill the cops and drag the man from the cab. They were stunned, I guess. People are like that. The driver was no good, no stomach in him. I wish I had been there."

Brown looked at him. Ramsey said: "I wish you had been." Then to Vee, "Kranz! Kranz is dead—must be dead." But his voice lacked conviction.

"That boy spoke the truth." Brown nodded. "Kranz was a cop killer, and Kranz could do a job like nailing up the body of Ludwig Loudon." And after a moment's pause, and very low, "But

Kranz would have nailed him up alive."

"Yes, yes." Ramsey rubbed at his chin. "He was a devil. But he wouldn't have the brains for it; not for a stunt like this—the Murder Syndicate. Besides, Kranz is dead."

Brown shook his head. "We don't know that. He disappeared in Mexico; that's all we know. Face the facts, Ramsey. The department wrote him off as dead; believed he was dead because they wanted him dead. No. Mitchel recognized Kranz. By God! Kranz palled with Sam Clausen, and Clausen was in this racket, and Clausen is—" He looked at me. "Clausen is dead."

Ramsey moved great shoulders. "We don't have to argue it. Kranz's prints are downtown in the files and—" Ramsey turned as a white-coated, slim-waisted attendant called his name.

When Ramsey returned from the telephone he said: "Unbelievable as it sounds, those prints on the hack were Kranz's." He stiffened, glared at Brown as if he suddenly noted and resented the intimacy that had seemed to spring up between them. "Get in touch with me then, tonight. Teddy Melrose will lead us directly to Kranz. Kranz was always a killer, but he was always thick. It would be like him to meet Melrose alone and take that jack."

"It might be like Kranz," Brown said, "but not like the brain that guides him—this Murder Syndicate. We have considerable thinking to do."

"Yeah. You have." Ramsey looked down at Vee. "Philip Jennings was your man. He came to you; came to you as an individual, not as the police department." And sarcastically, "The papers should know that." And when Brown said nothing, "We'll meet at your apartment tonight. Just the three of us will be enough."

"Quite enough," said Vee. And for

some time after Ramsey had left, we stood there upon the steps.

WE were in a taxi on our way back to the apartment when Brown spoke. "Ramsey won't have to give it to the papers," he said. "The Murder Syndicate will do that. They've come into the open, Dean. There's real brains behind the show."

"But, why—snatching Jennings like that? Why not kill him if—if it's publicity they seek?"

"Yes, they took a chance. I don't doubt for a minute, Dean, that the brain behind this organization knows that I was responsible for Sam Clausen's death. Others who work for him know it too. It hurt him, perhaps, with them. Now he seeks vengeance; vengeance as well as business. It's a defiance to the whole law and order of the city, but mostly a defiance just to me. You'll see!"

And we did see. The afternoon papers carried the story, carried a letter too, signed by the Murder Syndicate. Talk about defiance! I don't think anything like it ever happened in the city before. It was ghastly, preposterous, but there it was in glaring type, for every citizen to read.

To those who have not paid—

Philip J. Jennings, taxed by my organization, disobeyed instructions and went to the police. At least, he went to Detective Vee Brown and was assured protection.

He is now in my hands. Ludwig Loudon was found nailed in his own picture frame, dead. Jennings will be found nailed, living—if a man in such a position will live forty-eight hours.

All clients of the Murder Syndicate will receive due notice before Jennings is discovered, but his living body goes on the boards at two o'clock tomorrow morning.

THE MURDER SYNDICATE.

"God!" I said. "They—he must be mad."

Brown shook his head. "Not mad, Dean. Without a conscience, without a heart, without a soul even—but a student of human nature. What man, reading that, will hesitate to pay? Jennings sought the police, sought me—and the result—" He tossed the paper into the corner.

"No man would so such a thing. It's just bluff, just—"

Vee Brown swung on me. "We must face the facts, Dean. This fiendish brain who controls the organization might even nail a man to a wall himself. But he picks his men well. Cruel, vicious, known for particularly revolting crimes. There was Sam Clausen, who would have done it—but he is dead. Now there is Kranz. He would not only do it but suggest it—yes, and find pleasure in it. If that is madness—"

"And what are you going to do?"

"Do? Do! Well," he finally said, "if it is Kranz who meets Melrose tonight, and we have all the luck in the world, why—why—God! Dean, I don't know what I'm going to do. But whatever is done must be done quickly."

The phone rang. I lifted the receiver. It was hard to catch the words.

I said: "I'll see if I can locate Mr. Brown." And putting my hand over the mouthpiece I said to Vee, "It's Philip Jennings' daughter, Betty Jennings. I didn't say you were in; I felt you wouldn't want to talk to her, and—"

"I'm not yellow." Brown almost snatched the phone from my hand. But his conversation was not reassuring. It consisted of "Yes—yes," and "Of course—I'll be right over," just before he hung up.

"That's a real girl, Dean. Nothing of condemnation. Nothing but the fact that she was very close to her father and advised him to come and see me."

"You're—we're going over?" I was

following him to the hall. "What good can that do?"

He smiled very grimly. "Betty Jennings asked me to come. Her mother read the papers. The girl wants me to prevent her from—from killing herself."

I started to talk, but didn't. I guess I knew how he felt. Knew too, how hard it was going to be for Vee to face that wife, and the daughter of the man who had come to him for protection.

Maybe Vee didn't want me to go with him. At least, he didn't ask me. But he did smile at me—a rather sad sort of smile. And he did say: "You'd come, of course, Dean."

MRS. JENNINGS tossed on the bed. She clutched my hand first, and then Brown's. And I knew that her fingers burnt—burnt physically as much as her fiery eyes burnt mentally—must have burnt and stabbed into Vee.

"I love him—I love him!" she cried over and over. "Betty said you could save him. To see Philip—to find him like that—to know that he'll be like that. To—"

The nurse came in, forced the woman's fingers from Brown's wrists, started to push her back on the bed.

"She doesn't know what she's doing. She's—"

Brown looked at the girl, Betty. Young, straight, slender, deep hazel eyes—dry eyes. Then he pushed the nurse away, took both those groping, frantic, burning hands.

"Your husband is a very brave man." He looked straight at Mrs. Jennings. "He sought my protection. Nothing will happen to him."

"But the time. Two o'clock. God! I—I can't live after that, knowing—"

"Betty told you the truth." Brown spoke slowly, each word clear—as if he talked to a very small child. "By two

o'clock I'll bring your husband here. He will have done a great good, and—"

"You—you promise! You know that! You're not just—"

Vee smiled, that whimsical, crooked, little smile. "I don't make promises I can't keep. Nothing will happen to your husband."

The burning went out of her eyes very suddenly. They settled, clear but still bright, on Vee. His black ones held them.

"I know. I know! It's a trick then; a trick, and he's helping you—"

"That's right." Brown seemed to grab at her words and the idea they gave him. "It's a trick, and he's helping me."

The woman fell back on the pillow. She took the glass of medicine the nurse gave her. Brown and I left the room, followed Betty below.

She took his hand. "Thank you!" she said. "Thank you so much, Mr. Brown. It was a glorious lie, but it saved her, helped her. And I'll—well, I'll do all I can to make the thought stick until two o'clock."

Vee looked at her a long moment. "You didn't believe me then?"

Her eyes raised, sought his. "I've always believed in you. I've followed every case you've been in. I sent father to—you. I—You—" the pose went. She sobbed suddenly, staggered forward, and Brown caught her in his arms. "It wasn't true; it wasn't true. You—you—can't save him."

"I believed it myself," Brown told her, pushed back her head, looked down at her swimming eyes. "By God!" the words just shot through his lips, "I'll bring him back or—" He never finished the sentence.

ON THE way to the apartment I didn't speak. It was Brown who finally broke the silence. "I wonder," he said. "Did you believe me?"

"It's impossible, by two o'clock. I mean, to be so certain, so sure, so—"

"Hell!" he snapped. "I'm asking you a simple question. Did you believe me?"

"Why, I— Yes, I did."

"Good old Dean!" he said. "You believe me; the woman believed me. I believed myself. Now—it should be possible to convince one other person."

"Who— Kranz?"

"Possibly, if Kranz knows and if we get Kranz. But I was thinking of having a go at Rossimire. He passed the former death notes, you know. I might paint a picture of burning human flesh in the chair at Sing Sing."

"But, Pal! She said he wasn't ripe to talk."

"No, perhaps he isn't. We'll ripen him, Dean." And when I started to object, "Oh, I wanted to wait; I wanted to be sure. But you saw that woman and you saw that kid. It's not a question of—will Rossimire talk? It's simply a question of—can he?"

"You mean—"

"You know how Clausen died, and you know exactly what I mean. By God! I'll stop at nothing. Hammer and nails are for sale at any hardware store. It's just a question of what Rossimire will do when I lay them on the table before him."

"Brown! Vee!" I took him by the arm, shook him. "You're talking like a madman."

"Am I? Well—maybe I am. I promised Jennings protection. I didn't give it to him. And that daughter of his—Betty! No scorn; no abuse. She looked at me and believed in me." He shook his head, as if to rid himself of an unpleasant thought, and then, "I must find Pal, see Rossimire early. We have two irons in the fire, Dean—Rossimire and Kranz. In the mood I'm in, things are not entirely hopeless, but I wish I had more—just a little more time."

CHAPTER FIVE

Time to 'Go Up'

THERE was no need to hunt up Gertrude la Palatin. She was at our apartment when we arrived there.

"It's ghastly, Vee—terrible." She was holding a late paper. "It was even too much for Rossimire, I think. Anyway, he telephoned me. He's ripe to talk, to meet you secretly. He wants protection, immunity from the law."

"For what?" Brown looked at her. "What will he give in return?"

"The man. The brains behind the Murder Syndicate."

"He knows him then?" Brown's voice shook.

Pal shook her head. "I don't know. I only know what he said. That he'll lead you to the man tonight if you promise protection through the district attorney."

"He'll get it. He'll get it if he leads me to him tonight." And after a thought, "He must suspect, then, that Ida Trent talked; that she told me Rossimire passed the murder notes."

"No," Pal said very slowly. "I don't think he suspects. It's just too much for him to swallow. He's a crook at heart, Vee, no doubt of that. But his mind and soul aren't warped enough to stand for the gruesome handling of Ludwig Loudon's body, and now the fiendish threat to do the same with the living body of Philip Jennings."

And Brown was on the phone, talking to Mortimer Doran. There must have been objections, of course, but Brown begged, pleaded, threatened.

"If Philip Jennings is found nailed up like that, it will not only shock the country but will rock the administration. I tell you, Mr. Doran, this man is a shrewd man and will want it in writing. Yes, yes. It can be worded so that he'll have

to make good. Besides, his testimony may be necessary for a conviction. God knows— Ah! That's better. I'll stop in and get it from you."

Brown turned and rubbed his hands together. But his face fell a little when Pal told him that his appointment with Rossimire was not until eleven o'clock.

"Well—" he finally agreed, when Pal killed further argument with the flat statement that it would be impossible to even get in touch with Rossimire before that hour, "it's time enough I guess. We won't be leaving here, Dean, until twelve anyway. No, no. You can't come with me to see Rossimire. I'll need you here to give instructions to, if my plans change. And I can arrange to be at our destination before you."

Vee left me, dragging Pal into the music room. But whether they went over the words of the revue together or simply made plans for that night, or— But anyway no notes came from the piano and Pal's gripping throaty voice was silent. Yes, it was nearly eleven o'clock before Brown spoke to me of his meeting with Rossimire again. And then it was only when he was leaving, and it was I who brought up the subject.

"Is Pal to go with you?" I asked.

"No!" He snapped the single word, looked from me to her. It was a cinch they had argued that point out in the music room. And then, "I leave her at her hotel."

"Vee! Has it struck you that Rossimire may be setting a trap for you?"

"Certainly!" He nodded, then smiled. "And has it occurred to you that I may be setting a trap for Rossimire? If Ramsey arrives before my return, simply say I went out on business." He opened his mouth, snapped it closed again. His black eyes were hard, his thin lips set tightly. There was an assurance to the swing of his body; a confidence to the quick move-

ment of his right hand toward his left armpit. But I shook my head as the door closed behind him, behind both of them. Inside of me, down deep in my stomach was the feeling of disaster. I couldn't shake it off.

INSPECTOR RAMSEY and Teddy Melrose showed up at the apartment at eleven o'clock. I was surprised to see Melrose and told Ramsey so.

"Don't be a fool." Ramsey strutted up and down. "Brown and I work differently, that's all. Mr. Melrose came up in the service elevator and I met him two floors below. And he hasn't been followed. I've had him shadowed." Ramsey chuckled when Melrose looked at him. "You didn't know that, eh? Well—I didn't want you to know it, didn't want you acting funny. And what's more, I take care of lads who come to me. Nothing was going to happen to you!"

"And you think they'll let Melrose drive you up to Van Cortland Park and not watch that police don't follow him?" I said.

"Not them." Ramsey stuck out his chest. "Mr. Melrose has instructions to start from the Mayfair Hotel. They'll watch him start and they'll see that he's not followed. You and me and Brown won't follow him; we'll be there ahead of him. We'll be waiting on the side of the steep bank along that golf course."

"You think the three of us are enough?"

"Enough, with this." Ramsey tapped the long, bulging, leather case he had laid against the wall when he came in. "I can shoot as well as Brown, and I know how to handle a Tommy gun."

"But"—Teddy Melrose's eyes widened—"I'll be in the car when they approach it. You won't just—just open fire."

"Vee wants Kranz alive, if it is Kranz—or whoever it is," I said. "He hopes

to find out where Jennings is and perhaps locate the leader of the Murder Syndicate."

Ramsey stroked his chin. "If these lads can be taken alive they will be taken alive. But there isn't going to be any dead inspector of police decorating the golf course. You can bet on that." And suddenly, "Where the hell is Brown anyway?"

"He's out—on business."

Ramsey snapped open his watch. "Didn't take a run-out powder, did he?" He half sneered the words, and though I knew he didn't believe it, couldn't believe it, I said stiffly: "His business is the Murder Syndicate business."

"Yeah? So is this." Ramsey frowned slightly. "He knew it was to be just the three of us, and you are not much with a gun."

"Good enough," I said, "when I only have to point it at a single man's back."

"How do you know it will be only a single man?" And with a shrug, "Well—it's a job for no more than two, three at the most." And turning to Teddy Melrose, "You've studied it out pretty well. You won't make any mistake as to where to stop the car!"

"No." Melrose nodded. He didn't seem so cock-sure of himself now that the time for action was coming. He was on his third high-ball. "I just follow your instructions. Don't stop the car until I'm about fifty feet past the white piece of cloth the note says will be on the bush!" He consulted the letter from the Murder Syndicate again. "That's just around the bend. My headlight will flash on the cloth. Why the fifty feet? Won't that make them suspicious?"

Ramsey agreed, with a reservation. "Not if you come around the bend fast enough and pretend to have trouble jamming on the brakes. You drive a big car?"

"Yes, I do. A big open touring."

"But why go fifty feet by?" I said. "Won't we be hiding right at the exact spot?"

"Hardly!" Ramsey looked disdainfully at me. "They'll be in hiding there. We'll be fifty feet up the road. That'll make them come out on the road and walk up toward us. We'll jump them with their backs to us."

"You've got things figured out nicely." Teddy Melrose smiled, but the hand that lifted the glass shook.

"They might come in a car—" I started.

"Sure. Sure!" Ramsey agreed. "They might hop out of airplanes, but they won't. I know crooks. Twenty-two years, and— What the hell's the matter with your hand, Mr. Melrose? You're not going to turn yellow on us!"

TEDDY MELROSE laughed, but there was not much mirth in it. "I'll see it through. Be careful of that machine gun if you— But Brown doesn't want you to shoot!"

"Don't you worry," Ramsey said easily. "And don't get to thinking too much on the way up there; or if you do think—keep thinking what you have at stake, and that that ten million bucks of your aunt's is a lot of jack."

"I'll try." Melrose consulted his watch. "It's time enough for me to make it all right, but I thought you people would be hiding up there before this."

"Yes, yes." Ramsey looked at me. "Funny night for Brown to have business—any business!"

"He'll be here," I said stiffly.

"Well—maybe." Ramsey's eyes narrowed. "But we haven't got much time. I'll give him another five minutes, and then—"

He stopped. The phone rang. My hand gripped it tightly; my feet seemed to dig into the floor. Then the feeling just swept up over my body—cold, wet. I could even

feel it tingle in my face. The first sentence that came over the wire froze me.

"The Murder Syndicate speaking. Dean Condon?"

I can't be sure, but I think the voice repeated the words before I answered, before I could answer. Then I guess I said: "Yes, yes. That's right."

"Vee Brown was just a little too bright tonight." There was a hollow laugh. "And we may find use for the hammer and nails he so thoughtfully supplied. Listen carefully! Don't mention the name of Rossimire. Really, there is nothing against him, as evidence. But don't mention his name for forty-eight hours; and then maybe, when you see your little friend, it will keep your mouth closed."

"You— You have Vee! You have Brown!"

"You certainly grasp things quickly. Rossimire has him," the voice went on. "And I wish you luck in your journey to Long Island, and the young banker, Otto Liberman, who ran squealing to the police. Yes, Vee Brown told Rossimire how you had planned that. And he wanted to tell him, begged to tell him. We can be just as persuasive as Mr. Brown, you know." A pause but no click, and then hard and low and sinister, "Brown goes up with Jennings at two o'clock. The Murder Syndicate remembers Clausen—Sam Clausen."

There was a click then. But I didn't replace the receiver. I stood there with it in my hand. Someone took it from me, I guess.

Then Ramsey was shaking me and I was gulping down the drink Teddy Melrose held to my lips. Ramsey was firing questions at me; Melrose, too. I don't know what they said but I knew they were talking. It buzzed, buzzed there in my ears. Then it broke, suddenly snapped. Blood seemed to be running back into my body again, as if it had actually

left it; and I was talking, saying over and over: "They have Brown! They have Vee and they're going to nail him up tonight."

"God!" said Ramsey. "He walked into a trap, then. He— What is it, man? Talk!"

I blurted out: "Who is Otto Liberman? They tortured Vee. They got him and tortured him, and he said something about Otto Liberman tonight—Long Island. Who—" I was shaking Ramsey now.

RAMSEY held me. "Easy does it! Otto Liberman had a letter like Mr. Melrose here, and he was to pay tonight out Long Island way. I don't know if they really intended to collect or not, but the hour was much later. Still, they might have worked both."

"But, Brown. Why did he tell them that?"

"Well," Ramsey said, "it was partly my idea and partly Brown's, I guess. Otto Liberman was watched, and I made no secret of it down at headquarters that the cops would be covering him tonight and we might make a pinch. You see, if the Murder Syndicate believed we were working along that line—why, they'd feel pretty safe on the Melrose extortion up in Van Cortland Park. Now—Vee told them about Liberman under torture, eh?"

"I don't know. I guess so. But they couldn't have made him talk, and—"

"Well, it's a cinch he didn't tell them about this Van Cortland affair then. They knew that Liberman story was true, and—"

I was suddenly enlightened, said: "That means it's safe for us to go through with this one. Maybe Vee knew they were going to telephone me, gloat, laugh at the police trap with Otto Liberman. Maybe that's how Brown sent us a message to go through with this tonight and—"

"It looks good. It looks good for us but bad for Brown."

"No, no. Maybe good for him too. We might force these men to lead us to Brown, to— Don't you see? Don't—"

"Maybe!" Ramsey said. "But the capture of these men and the protection of Mr. Melrose comes first. Brown got himself into this, and—"

"It's up to us to get him out!" I was excited, frantic. "He did it to save Jennings. We can get more police, surround the woods up there, make Kranz talk if we get Kranz, and—"

Ramsey shook his head. "No time for arrangements for more police. Besides, it would be bad. Two or three of us can hide there all right, but many men, cruising cars— Hell! Even if we did trap them, word would go out that the section was lousy with police. If Kranz knew where Brown was and did talk, Brown would be moved. No, we go through with it as planned, but only two of us now—if you've got the guts, Condon."

"I—I— Of course—of course." I was putting on my top coat, running to the gunroom for my revolver.

"Easy does it." Ramsey grabbed my arm, said: "Melrose must leave by the servants' entrance. I've got that fixed. He's got plenty of time, but you and I have got to get up in those woods before the boys arrive. Come on!"

Out in the hall Melrose said: "Hadn't you better bring more men; two or three, and—"

"No!" Ramsey snapped. "I know my business. I know our plans. I won't change them now. There isn't time, and I wouldn't chance a leak if there was time. Get going!"

Melrose walked down the hall, returned; said: "Not another man, even?"

"No!" Ramsey raised his voice. "And remember—where it's just business with us, it's worth a cool ten million to you."

Melrose bobbed his head. "Sure! If

the road leads finally to the head of the Murder Syndicate."

When Melrose had gone I urged Ramsey to hurry.

"You can't hurry this," he told me. "After we get there it's a waiting game, lying in the bush. One o'clock is the time for us."

"And two o'clock is the time for Vee to—to—" I couldn't say it but I could not help think it. Two o'clock was the time for Vee to—to "go up."

"What time did Brown go out?" Ramsey asked.

"Shortly before eleven. Why?"

"It's not much after twelve. They certainly worked fast on him. He's a sap for pride, conceit. The 'Great I Am' business."

"He was probably attacked the minute he—he went where he went."

"And where was that?"

"I don't know."

CHAPTER SIX

I Turn Killer

THE horror of the thing gripped me. The Murder Syndicate had gotten under my skin. It wasn't like Brown to be taken in so—so easily. Yet, a dozen men might have jumped him. He was alone, with nothing but his two guns. His two guns! They had served their purpose often enough. And, Rossimire! Of course he had played Gertrude la Palatin all along. His fears, his nervousness, his final wish to see Brown and talk, were all the part of a well laid plot. Shrewd, clever reasoning of the jeweler himself, or the brain behind him—the brain that led the Murder Syndicate.

I could picture Brown there—there on the wall. And the papers screaming the news and frightening citizens into paying to prevent the same horrible death—yes, hurrying to pay. For what chance would

they have, what mercy could they expect, what—

I shuddered as the machine gun banged against my knees and Ramsey climbed into the taxi and took the seat beside me. He said: "I've got a car parked in a garage across town. I just want to be sure we're not followed. Buck up! I never liked Brown—don't now. But he's got a lot of tricks in that bag of his and—"

"Ramsey"—I gripped at his arm—"I know you never liked Brown. But—you'll do everything to—to save him?"

He looked at me a long time in the darkness; the darkness, punctuated by flashing street lights. "I suppose," he said slowly, "I ought to poke you in the beak for that crack. You forget that, after all, I'm a cop and Brown's a cop and—and a cop's a cop."

Ramsey was a thorough, efficient man if a hard-headed, stubborn one. We changed taxis twice, then walked quickly down a dark street and into a large garage. I don't think we were followed, and I'm sure that Ramsey knew we were not; but if we were, no shadow would have a chance there. A car backed against a cement wall, in the very center of a line of cars, was the one Ramsey sought. I had hardly climbed in the seat beside him when the machine gun was jammed down behind my back, the motor purred and we were off, leaving by an entrance on a different block.

Red lights meant nothing. Just Ramsey leaning out and bawling something to the officer on the beat. Twists and turns, and finally we dove into Central Park, out of it onto Seventh Avenue, up through Harlem. When we turned right instead of left and passed the Yankee Stadium I spoke for the first time.

"Van Cortland Park's the other side; we're away off."

"We're coming on it from behind, not

from Broadway," Ramsey told me. "And we're going to ditch this boat well up on the hill behind that road and hoof it down."

The elevated pillars of Jerome Avenue finally turned into the broad cement stretch of Central Avenue and we passed Woodlawn Cemetery. Not a nice thought, that; but still, the thought was there. I was about to speak to Ramsey again when we reached the end of the cemetery and started down the hill which led to Van Cortlandt Park.

Ramsey seemed straighter and stiffer as we slowly descended toward the park far below. And I didn't blame him exactly. We were dealing with a new racket, a new type of crime, an organization whose business was death—horrible, brutal death. I was nervous. I'm not denying that. Indeed, there could be no doubt of it. But peculiarly, no terror gripped me; not fear even. I was anxious, even eager for something to happen. Brown—Vee Brown, my friend! I don't think I ever liked him better or thought more of him than at the very moment Ramsey turned the car from the road, ran across a stretch of grass, twisted behind thick bush and jerked to a stop.

"We have to cross a couple of roads before we reach our hiding place," he told me. "The car can't be seen by other passing cars and wouldn't be found except by someone looking for it. The boys may drive around a bit, but they won't get out to examine the country; at least, so far away. Besides, they think we're on the Long Island job. Come on!"

WE made our way along close to the road where the foliage was thick, back from the highway when the protection from passing cars was not good.

A pause before we crossed a single intersection, a broad stretch of road that led down and through the golf course.

Once across that road the going was pretty rough. Not rough from the bush, the trees, nor the soft grass with an occasional big rock. The roughness was in our heads. Not imagination, certainly. One didn't have to "imagine" death in dealing with the Murder Syndicate. It was simply that the going was rough mentally. The picture that the mind painted was real; very real and very horrible. Ramsey and I both sensed it; both knew it. A false move meant death.

Before we made the final descent which would bring us close to the road along the golf links Ramsey gripped my arm; said: "I had a man up this way this afternoon; didn't dare chance it myself. There should be a mark here, a bit of paper. I don't want to chance a light. He gave me pretty good instructions how to find it. But, damn it, it's darker than hell!"

After a bit Ramsey whispered again. "This looks like the little clearing. Ah!" he stooped over quickly, lifted something white from the ground.

The moon was fairly generous. From my position just above him I looked over his shoulder. "Why, that's just a paper bag," I said. "A bunch of them around here, and—"

"But not just here and not just like this." Ramsey was looking at the bag, running a hand inside of it. He was talking, half to himself. "A banana skin, an apple core, a whole pickle and a chocolate bar." And to me, "That cinches it. Come on! We go straight down. There's thick brush at the bottom, and it's exactly fifty feet from where Teddy Melrose is to get his signal."

The going down was a bit harder then. A slip here and there, a curse as a loose stone rolled. We gripped each other's arms at times, but we made the foot of the bank, breathed easier, and on hands and knees ducked into the bushes.

I couldn't see what Ramsey was doing

but I knew that the leather came off the machine gun, that it flopped at my side, that he was parting the bushes.

"You're not going to shoot first!" I grasped his shoulder.

"It depends on what you mean—first." Ramsey's voice was low and harsh. "If you mean before they do, yes. If you mean without provocation, or without an order for them to chuck up their hands and drop their rods, no." He paused, and I heard his lips smack. "But I won't leave these bushes until they are unarmed or riddled with bullets. That much is certain!"

"Brown's life may depend on taking them alive," I said.

"That's right." A white face bobbed in the blackness. "Brown's life may depend on taking them alive, but our lives may depend on taking them dead."

IN the next ten or fifteen minutes I rather admired Ramsey. Of course I couldn't tell but possibly the cold sweat was pouring down his face as it was down mine. I was doing this, going through with this, in hope of saving my friend; while Ramsey—well, it must have been a simple sense of duty with him. Grim and silent, and with the nose of the Tommy gun pointed out on that roadway, he crouched there waiting.

Minutes? Certainly. Hours? Well—no, it couldn't have been, though it seemed like it. Then—one o'clock on the illuminated dial of Ramsey's watch. I didn't see the dial; I didn't need too. His nudge in my side, the stiffening of his arms, the slight crackle of bush as the Tommy gun raised!

My own gun came into my hand; I leaned forward. The hum of a high-powered motor purred in the night, grew louder.

"Keep cool, boy." Ramsey's voice shook. Not with fear or nerves, I guess.

Excitement—that was all. But any man might very easily feel fear. Would it be Kranz? Kranz, who was already wanted for more than one murder; Kranz, a man who would not hesitate to do murder again; Kranz, a man that the state could roast only once, whose further killings could receive no punishment!

I had plans all right. Wild ones maybe. I even pictured sticking a gun in Ramsey's back and promising Kranz his freedom if he told us where Vee Brown was. Yes, I'd have done it for Vee; I'd—And I gripped my gun tightly.

Headlights flashed suddenly down the road, flashed on and off. Sudden darkness, the grinding of brakes, the screech of protesting rubber.

Every muscle tense, so tense that it hurt, I leaned forward and saw plainly the black hulk of the touring car that came to a stop not ten feet beyond our place of concealment. Nervous or not, Teddy Melrose had pulled things off right on the dot and according to instructions.

"Ready!" Ramsey whispered. "Things will have to happen quickly. They won't—" His fingers gripped my arm, strong hard fingers that hurt. I caught the little grunt of sudden pain and killed it in my throat. His hand fell away.

Two dark figures were approaching that car. Men who meant business. A long thing that I thought was a rifle and later turned out to be a sawed-off shotgun dangled in the taller man's right hand. The other man held a revolver.

"All right, brother." The taller man came close to the car and called to Teddy Melrose. "Fork over the dough and—Hell! make it snappy." The shorter man, who had been facing the woods, turned toward the car. And we were out of the bush, Ramsey in the lead.

"Drop the hardware and drop it quick!" Ramsey cursed out the words.

"A Tommy gun speaking, boys!" he added.

A REVOLVER and a sawed-off shotgun crashed to the road. Two men swung and faced Ramsey, their hands high in the air, their faces showing white in the moonlight.

"Yellow, eh?" Ramsey sneered. "Can't take it when the big moment comes." He peered closely at the two figures. "Huh—a couple of hoods! So Kranz didn't have the guts for this job. Come on, move forward!" He edged around, got his back to the car. "Keep close to the car, Condon," he told me. "If danger should come, it'll come from the woods."

I jammed my gun hard against the big fellow's back.

"Where's Brown—Vee Brown?" I demanded.

Ramsey laughed, dropped the machine gun into his left hand, struck out viciously with a huge right. The smaller man staggered, then crashed to the road.

Ramsey said to me: "You're a novice at this game, Condon. Give a gun to Melrose, keep your rod in that other lad's back and watch me work."

He kicked the prostrate man in the face, knocked him over on his back, shoved the Tommy gun against his chest.

"Where's Philip Jennings and the mugg, Brown? Come on! Or I'll empty this typewriter into your stomach."

"No. Hell!" The man's voice raised almost to a shout. "Don't! If I was dead I couldn't talk."

"Who gives a damn?" Ramsey's words shot through his teeth. "I'm just putting this lead in your belly so your friend will talk." Ramsey half swung his head and looked at the taller man I covered. "Watch how he takes it, brother, and see how you'll like it right smack in—"

It happened. The voice came from behind. It finished Ramsey's sentence. The

voice said: "And how would you like it, Inspector Ramsey, right smack through the side of the head?"

I know that something pounded down on my head; I know that the tall man I was covering swung around; and I know that I closed a finger on the trigger of my gun. I may have been slow, it may have been mechanical, that closing finger. But I saw the sagging jaw before me, the puzzled, surprised look on the man's face. I saw too, and I think with more alarm than satisfaction, the red upon the whiteness of a shirt. Then the thud again, a peculiar dull feeling, and a blur before my eyes; and finally a dead face with sightless eyes looking up at me as I crashed down on top of the man I had shot.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Living Pictures

A CAR was moving and someone was talking. I felt the motion and heard the voice. Someone knocked up my head and cursed. Pain shot sharply up my neck, through the back of my head as it crashed against the rear seat. Yes, that's right—the rear seat of a car. Black curtains were drawn tightly. It was a touring, Melrose's touring car.

My eyes blinked open and closed. Things were all right then. I had thought, thought—I straightened, stiffened. That bullet-like head of the driver didn't belong to Melrose. And things cleared. My hands were tied tightly behind my back. My feet! •Well—they rested on something soft and yielding, something human, on the floor—something dead.

And a voice spoke beside me; it was low, guttural. "He's dead all right, Mr. Condon; deader than hell, and you killed him. That won't make things pleasant for you." And after a pause, "I'm Kranz." He laughed. "But don't worry. After

you're dead, what difference does it make how you went over?"

"Ramsey—" I started.

Ramsey spoke beside me. "We were taken in like children," he growled. "Oh! I'm not blaming Melrose, but another lad might have given us a tip."

"What happened? Where's Melrose?"

"Slumped in the front seat, tied up too." Ramsey half sighed. "They suspected the trap—had Melrose followed when he came to me, and up to your place—though how the devil they worked it I can't see. But I don't mind going out; it's how we were taken in. That telephone call made us certain that we weren't suspected."

"But I didn't see them."

Kranz chuckled. "You tell it, Ramsey. It sounds like a school girl's confession of 'how I went wrong.'"

Ramsey said, in the same dull voice: "Kranz simply stopped Melrose under the elevated over on Broadway, hopped in the boat, crouched on the floor and covered Melrose all the way. Oh, I guess Teddy was game enough; he didn't squeal, but he was scared stiff."

He had his choice between being scared stiff, or just plain stiff," Kranz said.

"You're going to— What are you going to do with us?" I asked.

Kranz leaned back and laughed. Another man I couldn't see in the darkness laughed too. But Kranz spoke.

"No one can tell what the boss will do." So I knew that Kranz wasn't the leader. "But we can guess. It's a rare haul and no mistake, even for the Murder Syndicate. Jennings, who ran squealing to the police; Vee Brown, the great detective who shoots them—sometimes; Inspector Ramsey, who figured out the way to trap Leo Kranz; Teddy Melrose"—he laughed there—"the play boy who was too tight to put up fifty grand to save a fortune."

"You're— We're all to die?" I said.

"Boy! That would be my guess."

"And like—like Loudon?"

"Like Loudon, yep. And that's my job. Cripes! What a job! Nailing up a couple of cops and getting paid for it! Cops. Cops!" I think I saw his hand shoot out with the gun in it. Anyway, I heard the gun strike flesh—bone, and saw the red against the white of Ramsey's face.

"Easy does it, Kranz," his friend warned. "We're almost there."

And we were there. Wheels jarred onto a driveway, scraped along gravel, shot down an incline and came to a stop.

THE driver slipped from the car. I could see him in the dull reflection from the headlights, lights that shone on a plain cement wall. We were inside a small garage; a garage that I thought must be beneath and attached to a private house. The chances were that we were out of the city; in the suburbs; at least, up in the Bronx.

Heavy doors closed behind us, then a single light splashed from the ceiling. The car lights went out; doors opened and we were half pulled, half dragged from the car. All three of us had our hands held behind our backs, Ramsey's with police cuffs. I wondered if they were his own. My hands were bound with rope and so were Teddy Melrose's.

Ramsey stumbled and fell to one knee. Kranz cursed and struck him viciously, leaned over him, kicked him in the face, finally dragged him to his feet.

"I hate coppers," Kranz said, and for the first time I got a real look at the wanted murderer's face. No hope for us there. Cruel, crafty, rotten. Here was a man who could find pleasure in torturing a dog or—or— And I thought of Ludwig Loudon, his hanging head, his outstretched hands. I shuddered.

Teddy Melrose spoke behind me. Was

there a sneer in his voice? "Can't take it, eh? Well—I suppose you blame me for this."

Ramsey spoke through bloodstained lips. "No one is to blame but me, if that does any of you any good."

And I think—at that moment I liked Ramsey better than I ever did before in my life.

"Come on! Get going!" Kranz snapped. "Up them stairs."

And up the narrow flight of cellar stairs we went. Things were clear to me now—too clear—never clearer. There were three of us and three other men. I don't know what I should have done, what Brown would have done. It was in my mind to turn suddenly on those steps, kick out and—and what? No, Vee Brown would have done just as we did, I guess. Just walked calmly up those stairs to his death.

And, Brown! Would he be there, above? Would he be waiting for us? And would he be—be—be— My feet wobbled; I staggered slightly. A gun prodded me on. A voice said: "If you ain't got the guts to walk, we'll drag you."

Dim lights, a sink in the kitchen, a dining room, more stairs, a room above—a large room.

And Ramsey spoke. "The boss! We are to meet him? He's here?"

"Hell! What do you care? You ain't going to carry memories—not you," Kranz said.

"I've seen you, Kranz—know you. Hardly believed such an animal could live today. Now—before I die I'd like to see the brain that directs you, the hand that guides you."

"No hand guides me. No—" And Kranz stopped. "Well—he's got brains. You'll see him, see him in a way that will surprise you."

We were in that room. All hope left me as we were bound tightly to three

straight-back chairs. There in a corner, tightly bound to an overturned chair, was a man. Brown? I thought so at first. I couldn't be sure, wasn't sure until Kranz straightened the chair, said: "I told you not to clown around. Now look at yourself. All dirtied up. What will your family think—and you to be such a pretty picture."

I recognized the drawn, strained—yes, terror-stricken face of Philip Jennings. So Brown was not there.

"I'll pay—I'll pay!" Jennings said. "Anything. Any amount. My family! My—"

"You had your chance, buddy," Kranz opened a box, took out a hammer, tossed it onto the floor, turned over the box and let great nails, huge spike-like lengths of metal, clang slowly to the floor.

I KNEW fear then, knew deadly fear; just as Jennings knew it, just as the others must have known it.

"Where's Vee? Where's Brown?" I guess it was I who spoke, for it was I Kranz answered.

"Now, that's right thoughtful of you. You want him here to enjoy the pretty pictures! And he's going to be here." Kranz turned from me and put his sneering thick lips close to Ramsey's face. "Get it, copper? A picture gallery. Living pictures."

Ramsey said, and his voice didn't shake: "You can't get away with this, Kranz. You can't carry us, living, from this room and—"

"Hell! You're going to stay in this room. A day or two with each other for company, nailed up to those walls. Maybe three days. Just a private exhibit! Then we're going to send the public an invitation to come and view the pictures." And to me, "After all, you made it easier for us, Condon. No danger of ever being caught! The lad you killed is the lad who

rented this house, so—the only one who could be identified. Big business!" He rubbed his hands, jerked a thumb at a huge black box on a table.

"Camera!" Kranz explained. "You guessed it. We're going to send a picture to the papers first. And that picture will be worth a fortune if they've got the guts to publish it. Wouldn't you pay, Condon; wouldn't you pay anything if you were one of our clients and received such a picture?"

The tall thin man, who had been silent, spoke. "I'm worrying about Rossimire, Kranz. He should be here with Brown. He had Tony and Ritter with him, and—"

Kranz sneered in. "Don't you worry. You can get out before the party starts. Hell! I don't want sick boys hanging around. Me and you—eh, Fink?" He turned to the bullet-headed, rat-eyed short man.

Fink nodded, moved his shoulders. "O.K.!" he said. "I don't like coppers either. And, Kranz, you better let Freddy go. He might find out what's happened to Rossimire. He don't answer the phone."

So Rossimire was bringing Brown! Brown, who— I turned my head and watched the tall man pass out the door; watched even the shadows that he had passed through, and wished—yes, frantically wished that I was that man; that I—

But the man was gone and Kranz was talking. Queer, odd, almost like a teacher, he was explaining things to us. Our death was to be so horrible that I couldn't actually believe it; couldn't believe that another human being would permit it, let alone assist in it. No, one man might be so devoid of all human feeling, but two— And I looked at Fink. I believed it then all right. For Fink was actually nodding his head, watching Kranz with undisguised admiration, listening to every word. Fink was a small man, and the dying words of

Mitchel, the policeman, had been that a tall and a short man had shot him and the other officer. Well, Fink—yes, Fink must have been the short man. No hope there. No hope anywhere.

As Kranz talked on I thought of Brown's often repeated statement of gunmen and murderers talking themselves to death. Well, perhaps that was true. But now— I gulped. Here was the exception that proved the rule. Kranz was talking us—all of us—to a horrible lingering death—to a horrible lingering torture.

"Gentlemen," he mocked us, "the Murder Syndicate planned one big display, one haul worth millions. All your bodies found together may be the big and final drive of our organization. Nothing to do after that but collect—at least, for a while. What an advertisement! What an incentive to pay, and pay quickly! And the commissioner of police and the district attorney. Will their faces be red? The two biggest guys in the business! Inspector Ramsey, the pride of New York's finest; Detective Vee Brown, the Killer of Men. The Crime Machine who—"

He paused, and then: "It's time to begin. Brown or Ramsey was to go last anyway. We'll begin on Jennings? What do you say, gentlemen?"

HE looked at each of us in turn. God! What eyes he had! What cruel, deep, evil balls; and behind them I saw for a moment his soul—at least, something rotten and loathsome and—

Kranz turned, whipped out a knife, cut the ropes that bound the slender pitiful figure of Philip Jennings.

I don't think Jennings fully understood at first. He kept saying over and over: "I'll pay—I'll pay anything! They—I wouldn't want them to see me like that—like Loudon. Not Betty—not—not—I'll pay—I'll—"

And suddenly he saw it, just as I saw

it. The cross piece of wood—thick, strong wood—there on the floor; there on the floor, where Kranz was dragging him.

Jennings fought then. He kicked and screamed.

God! It was terrible to watch. Once the little man broke entirely free and dashed across the room, but not toward the door. He just ran wildly, blindly, straight against the blank wall; knocking himself back, sprawling on the floor like some terrified little animal.

Leo Kranz was a huge powerful brute of a man. He dragged Jennings across the floor. He was screeching now, screeching in stark terror as he came nearer to the thick wood—T-shaped wood.

Kranz lifted him to his feet, hurled him from him against the wall. Jennings raised his hand, tried to grip the smooth surface of the wall and sank groaning to the floor.

I guess I screamed out too. I know that Kranz looked at me, grinned, dragged Jennings to that wood, tossed his body over and— And it was going to happen; it was happening. Fink was holding the man down, his arm out. There was the hammer, the nails, the single great pointed spike in Kranz' hand.

Ramsey said: "Close your eyes."

I couldn't close them. The lids wouldn't move; the pupils wouldn't turn. They stared—fixed, fascinated.

Jennings' slim body squirmed now, twisting—an agonized, slow, writhing movement. And the spike was there—black against white. The hammer raised in a huge hand; thick knuckles bulged as great fingers gripped it tightly. It was moving, too, starting slowly downward—moving faster. And—and—

The hand stopped. Kranz' body turned. He looked toward the door, reached under his left arm. Fink had turned too, shifty eyes moving, a gun dangling uncertainly in his right hand.

The door banged open. A man dove in—fairly dove into the room. Fink raised his gun and fired once. The man staggered, fell to one knee, clutched at his side. Fink's gun came up again.

Kranz cried out: "Cut it, you fool! It's Rossimire." And coming to his feet, "What's the trouble? What's the racket? Hell man, what happened? What—"

The hook-nosed man who had dashed in blurted out the words. "It's Brown. I had to. He made me call you, and he's— God! He's—he's—"

The voice from the doorway was quiet, easy, sarcastic.

"He's here!" Vee Brown said and shot Fink straight between the eyes before Fink ever raised his gun.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Vee Brown Speaks

BBROWN. Vee Brown! Yes, he stood there in the doorway, leaning against the side of the door. There was a smile on his lips. It wasn't a pleasant smile; it wasn't the whimsical, crooked little grin that marked the Master of Melody. It was the grim determined, slightly cruel curve of the mouth that marked the Killer of Men.

"Drop the gun, Kranz," he said softly. "You— So you want it that way!"

I think Kranz fired and I think that his bullet tore into the floor just by Brown's feet. But I saw Brown's lips twitch, his eyes narrow slightly, and I saw Kranz hurled back as Brown's bullet tore a hole in his chest.

There was action after that—at least, excitement. I know that Jennings struggled up and stared at Brown, his back against the wall. I know that Ramsey let out a long whistling burst of air and struggled at the ropes that held him to the chair. Maybe I struggled too, but probably I didn't. I guess I was frozen

there, held rigid in that chair by the sudden turn of events, the rapidity of the action, the rapidity of sudden death.

But Melrose struggled. It must have been a superhuman effort too, for he broke free; at least, he broke free from the chair and dashed wildly toward the door.

Brown swung, called to him. I don't know what he said. But the words and his voice were meant to be soothing. The fear, the terror—even after all was over—gave Melrose the sudden strength to break loose.

Brown moved toward him too, almost between Melrose and the door, when Ramsey shouted his warning.

"Brown. Kranz! Look out!"

I turned just as Kranz fired. Yes, lying there on his back with the great hole in his chest, Kranz had raised his gun and shot at Brown. I don't think it was a good shot, even a close shot. I saw Vee's gun go up, saw him hesitate before he jumped to the left of Kranz, and then as Kranz slowly—and from the agony on his face, painfully—swung his right hand with the gun in it, Vee fired three shots; rather slow, evenly spaced shots, right into Kranz' huge body.

I could swear afterward that I heard each bullet thump into Kranz' body, but Brown laughs at that. One thing I do know. I saw that huge body jerk spasmodically as each bullet pounded into it—jerk and thud—jerk and thud—three distinct times.

It was horrible to watch, yet Vee Brown stood over the man and carefully spaced those shots.

"I wonder if he felt them, Dean?" he said afterward when he cut me loose, and nodding at Ramsey found the key to the cuffs in Kranz' pocket. "Keep an eye on Rossimire, Ramsey. He's a triple-crossing stoolpigeon. And don't blame Teddy Melrose too much. I guess it was

pretty rough going. Something must have snapped in his head when he suddenly realized he was safe. He'll be back or we'll pick him up on the road some place. Get yourself a gun from one of those stiff, Ramsey; you too, Dean—for the head of the Murder Syndicate was, or is, expected here tonight."

BBROWN was especially solicitous for Jennings; placed him in a chair so that his back was to the wooden thing on the floor, and the two dead men beside it.

"By God! Mr. Jennings," he said as he lifted the shade and threw open the window, "that wife of yours and Betty are going to be mighty proud of you. It was your courage and sense of civic duty that made possible the death of a dozen-times-over murderer, and the end of the Murder Syndicate—yep, the end of it. For Mr. Ulrich Rossimire knows the man, the brain behind the show—and he's going to talk." Brown swung suddenly on Rossimire.

"I ought to fill you full of lead, you three-timing skunk." He grabbed Rossimire by the throat, shook him as he crouched there on his knees in the corner. "Sure!" Brown spoke to me and Ramsey. "I suspected he'd trap me. I suspected that his going with Gertrude la Palafini was to trap me, not squeal to me. He knew I suspected him. Well, I didn't enter his house through the front door as expected. I came through a second-story window. There's one for the jail and one for the morgue down in Rossimire's house, Ramsey. Then Rossimire, caught, offered to sell out the head of the Murder Syndicate. Oh, he wouldn't tell me the name of the man, though he knows it—just told me he'd be here tonight."

"Where is 'here'?" I cut in. "Where are we, Vee?"

"Up back of Park Hill, in Yonkers, Dean. Three or four houses surround us

but all are empty. Built in the boom days and—"

"To hell with that!" said Ramsey. "What happened?"

"Oh, Rossimire went through with it until we were here in the house, then he lost his nerve—or got it back, according to how you look at it—and jumped in here with his warning to Kranz." And to Rossimire, "Cut out the squirming. That bullet in the shoulder isn't going to hurt you any. Now, come on! The big squeal. Who's the man?"

Rossimire whined: "He'll kill me if I talk. He'll—"

"They'll roast you if you don't talk."

Rossimire made funny noises in his throat, said: "That paper! The district attorney! I'll tell if—if—God! I want another chance. God! I want—I want air."

He half crawled, half pulled his body across to the open window.

Brown said: "I guess it's worth it," walked over by the floor lamp and took an envelope from his pocket.

A shot rang out—just a single shot. Then the tumbling of Ulrich Rossimire's body to the floor—and darkness.

Ramsey cried out: "What the hell!"

"I snapped the light," Brown called. "Stay away from the window."

Feet moving; Brown cursing as he stumbled over something, his figure dully outlined there by the window; and finally the drawing of the shade and the light again.

Brown said: "Rossimire was right. The head of the Murder Syndicate was here. No use to bother about him now. The house is built on a steep bank. He simply plugged Rossimire through the window I so conveniently opened, dropped back from the little balcony outside and left." Brown's voice was rather sad, I thought, but it brightened almost at once. "Rossimire is hardly one to cry over—and,

after all, Kranz isn't such a bad catch. Besides, my special charge, Mr. Jennings, here is safe and coming around in great shape."

BBROWN was listening to Ramsey's account of the events of our most unpleasant evening.

I asked, looking down at the grotesque heap upon the floor: "Rossimire! He's dead, Vee?"

"Shot through the head." Brown was whistling softly as he searched the dead Kranz and Fink. "It was a large-caliber gun, I think, but he's dead enough to bury anyway. Ah! That's what I want. Let's get going!"

"What?" I looked at the gun in Brown's hand. "Why—it's mine! My gun."

"Sure!" said Brown. "And in its way, the most important and most startling exhibit of the whole case."

We left after that. Brown had been right. As we drove the big touring from the garage and down to the gate we were stopped by a very much frightened and white-faced Teddy Melrose.

"Hello!" Brown helped him into the car. "Came back, eh?"

"I never left. I don't know what came over me. A blue funk, I guess," Teddy Melrose stammered. "I heard a shot and saw a man run; back across the grounds there." He pointed, without much direction. "A motor started after that. I'm sorry. I guess the thing got me."

"It's your own hard luck," said Brown. "That figure you saw was the head of the Murder Syndicate. If you had caught him—Well, a hero's picture on the front page of every newspaper in the country might have made that aunt of yours think twice before leaving ten million to charity. It's a lot of money to lose just because you didn't make a flying tackle."

We were speeding over toward Broad-

way when Ramsey started in. The old animosity was in his voice.

"You let us take a chance like that just so you could pull your melodramatic act! You gave them that Long Island steer to tell us—"

Brown cut in. "I held a gun to Rossimire's head when he telephoned Kranz that he had me prisoner. I made him repeat the message after me. But Rossimire didn't know of the trap you planned with Melrose, or that Kranz anticipated that trap."

"It—it— Are you trying to tell me, Brown," Ramsey said sharply, "that it was just a coincidence—your coming when you did?"

"Coincidence!" Brown stroked his chin. "That's hardly the word. I don't believe in coincidence. It was just luck—luck for you, Ramsey."

GERTRUDE LA PALATIN was at the apartment. She threw her arms around Vee. I guess both she and myself were slightly hysterical with relief.

I gulped down my whisky and soda and reached for another while Brown sipped

his drink leisurely and examined my gun.

"That gun!" I said. "Why is it important?"

He smiled, that crooked little curve to the corner of his lips. "You killed a man with it tonight, Dean. It must have a special place in the gunroom. Your baptism of fire!"

I frowned, then smiled. Now that I had actually killed a man it didn't seem so terrible. "You think tonight will end the Murder Syndicate, the man behind it?" I queried.

Vee was silent a long time. "I hope not," he said finally.

"You— What do you mean—you hope not?"

"Well— I believe the man will want another crack at it; at least, I think he'll want another crack at me. And I'm dead sure that I want another crack at him."

"If you both feel that way," I half joked, "you should get your wish."

Yes, I half joked. But I didn't know then how soon that wish was to be granted. Nor how far from a joke Brown's meeting with the head of the Murder Syndicate was going to be.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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IT WILL BE OUT
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He had a gun but he never got to use it.

One-Buck Pay-Off

by

George Harmon Coxe

Author of "Slay Ride," etc.

This was no job for a private dick, according to the cops, and particularly for the one who happened to be on the murder spot. But Ragan didn't see things that way. As long as his client could pay a retainer he considered himself hired, ready to give more than death-value on the dollar.

CHAPTER ONE

Death on the Sidewalk

THE taxi driver had already shifted into low, and when the orange of the traffic light turned to green he let out the clutch. The cab jerked ahead as the ancient gears ground protestingly. The driver glanced at the headlights bearing down on him from the right, then the glance became a stare of amazement. He yelled and stood on the brake pedal.

The cab slued to a stop, threw Ragan forward against the back of the front seat. A siren shrieked a brief warning and a small black sedan, the painted gold shield of the police department gleaming on the front door, crashed the red light, cut deftly around the front of the cab and continued down State Street with an even, undiminished roar.

The taxi driver had stalled the cab. Now he began to swear. "Those headquarters

dopes'll kill somebody yet," he growled. "Did you see the way—"

"Follow it!" Ragan pushed back on the seat. In the brief instant when the police car shot past the cab's headlights he had caught a quick glimpse of a pink, heavy-jowled face on the front seat beside the driver. Lieutenant Lohrke, homicide.

"Follow it, chump!" Ragan snapped again. "Or are we anchored?"

Recovered from his shock, the driver let out the clutch with a jerk, swung the wheel left and gave the accelerator a work-out. By the time he straightened out, the tail-light of the police car was nearly three blocks away. But from that point on the distance did not increase.

It was only eleven o'clock, but State Street, dipping gently down into the financial and business section of the city, was a deserted, drab-walled canyon. Life here was on an eight-hour day. Darkness gave it the quiet of a residential street.

Ragan, sitting on the edge of the seat with his feet flat on the floor, watched the tail-light swing right into Pearl Street. When the cab followed, the tail-light had stopped at the curb two blocks ahead in front of a row of three- and four-storied brick buildings that looked all black in the shadows.

Ragan told the driver to stop at the next corner. He swung out on the running board as the tires scraped against the curbing, thrust a dollar bill at the driver and continued on to the middle of the block on a dead run.

He slid to a stop beside a uniformed policeman, noticed that there were two police cars at the curb. Lieutenant Lohrke and two plainclothesmen, squatting on their heels and swearing in awed, hushed tones, stared down at the inert body of a man who lay sprawled in the middle of the six-foot sidewalk. Another body was crumpled in a narrow doorway that separated a small jewelry store and a

stationery shop, and led to the offices above.

Ragan said: "I was on my way home from a show. Saw your car go—"

Lohrke sprayed the beam of his flashlight on the face of the man on the sidewalk, a face that was lean, long-jawed, freckled. Ragan choked on the rest of the sentence, stiffened, sucked in his breath.

"McCaffery!" he breathed. "My God!"

Lohrke looked up, swiveled the flashlight into Ragan's face, spoke something unintelligible. Then he stood up abruptly. "McCaffery—and Carlton," he said.

Ragan said: "Jim—Jim Carlton?" and spun toward the crumpled form in the doorway.

Lohrke caught his arm, jerked him back.

"This," he clipped out bitterly, "is no job for a private dick."

RAGAN didn't try to free his arm. He faced Lohrke, did not speak for a moment. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness now. It was not as black as he thought. The sky was clear, starlit; the headlights from the headquarters car, and the yellow glow from the hallway of the ancient office building, spread through the doorway and cast a dim glow over the sidewalk. Lohrke's eyes were black pools in a thick face that now seemed sallow rather than pink.

"Cop killer?" Ragan asked in a low, flat voice.

Lohrke let go of the arm. He was a big man, Lohrke. Beefy, capable in a loud-voiced, blustering sort of way. His words now were curiously choked, throaty.

"You'd better beat it, Ragan. There'll be no client to give you a stand-in on this."

Hot anger was surging up through Ragan's veins. It took a tremendous mental effort to check his bitter retort. He glanced down at the man in the doorway. "I went to the police academy with Carlton," he said grimly. "We started out together."

"You're a private dick now."

"He was my friend, just the same," Ragan said.

He turned, saw that the two plain-clothesmen were watching him. He knew them both, Grady and O'Dell. There was something in their manner that he could not diagnose. Shock from the deaths of brother officers—yes. But something more than that. Something awkward, almost shifty, masked their faces.

He turned back to Lohrke. "I'm in it now. I think I'll stay in. What's the stall?"

Lohrke's gaze was steady, but he did not speak.

"You can tell me or not, as you damn please," Ragan said, in tones that were hardened, yet curiously modulated. "But I'll get the set-up anyway and—"

"We don't know the set-up," Lohrke growled, "and we're afraid to find out." He inhaled noisily, spread his hands and let them slap against his thighs. "Carlton's got it in the right temple—a contact wound! His gun was a couple inches from his hand. It's been fired twice—and there's one slug in McCaffery—one in his heart. Looks like it's from Carlton's gun. There was talk of bad blood between 'em."

Ragan breathed a curse and leaned forward so that his nose was but inches from Lohrke's face.

"Why, you louse!" he snarled. "You stand there and tell me you think Carlton shot McCaffery, then killed himself just because they had an argument about a pinch last month!" He cursed once more, added: "I don't know McCaffery much, but I know Carlton. He never—"

"Am I thinking that because I want to?" Lohrke growled. His voice was nasty, threatening. "When this thing breaks in the papers—" He broke off, mouthed an oath. "I know how it'll look, and I knew Carlton, too. But, by Gawd, I'm scared as hell of what the examiner'll find."

SAM RAGAN turned away then, stepped to the curb. He was a tall man, but very thin, with a thinness that was deceptive. He seemed all legs, wrists deceptive. He seemed all legs, wrists and elbows. Yet, only his legs were really skinny. The rest of his weight was in his chest and shoulders and his bony fists packed a wallop because of the leverage and the flat-muscle torso. A wrestler might tie him into a pretzel; a boxer would have his troubles.

He moved slowly along the curb, his thin, high-cheekboned face lowered so that his long chin was on his chest. His black eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the pavement edge. The asphalt, newly sprinkled, glistened at the crown, and little pools of water nestled against the curbing.

He could hear Lohrke and Grady talking, but he did not know what they were saying. He was thinking about Carlton. Eight years ago they had started out together. They were rookies at Station 16. Ragan liked the game, but the regulations and red tape of the department irked him.

Then, after two years, Ragan's father had died, leaving him a little money. He had left the force, set himself up in business as a private detective. It had been a long pull, the past six years, but it had been worth it. He had a bit of a reputation, comfortable offices, and assistant, a stenographer.

Carlton, big, blond, blue-eyed with a good-natured, even disposition, had gone on with the force. Was a first-grade detective now. In business their paths seldom crossed, yet their friendship had en-

dured. Now . . . Ragan cursed bitterly, kicked at the curb. Carlton had never killed himself and—

Ragan's thoughtful eyes fastened on the envelope. It was about three feet from the spread-legged uniformed policeman, standing vertically against the wet curbing. Absently, his mind still fogged with thoughts of his friends, he picked it up. It was damp, dirty, and the stamp was tilted at a peculiar angle, as though it had been slapped on in a hurry.

Ragan read the address: *Frank Wilson, 317 Wayne Street*. He turned it over. The name meant nothing to him. He pivoted, his eyes still downcast, started back to Lohrke. Then he saw the splotch on the sidewalk.

QUICKLY thrusting the envelope into his coat pocket, he grunted softly and dropped to one knee, his hand darting to his vest pocket for the small flat flashlight. In the concentrated yellow rays the splotch was elliptical, about two inches long. He glanced up, saw that it was about three feet from McCaffery's body, and almost at the edge of the curb.

"Lohrke."

The lieutenant stepped to his side and Ragan said: "That's blood."

Lohrke bent down, inspected the clotting stain. "What of it?" he rasped. "Probably where McCaffery was shot. Probably took a step forward before he dropped."

Ragan started to speak, checked himself. He moved over to McCaffery's body. Lohrke had opened the man's vest and blood stained a three-inch area on the chest. But if there was any blood on the sidewalk, it was under the body.

Ragan straightened up, said: "Well, do I get the rest of the set-up before the examiner comes?"

Lohrke took a cigar from his pocket, thrust it into his thick-lipped mouth with-

out even bothering to bite off the end.

"About twenty minutes ago some bird called in, said there were a couple guys loitering around the jewelry store. We don't know who called, but the fellow said he walked down the street about forty minutes ago, and the two guys were here; when he came back fifteen minutes later, they were still here."

Lohrke swiveled the cigar, crunched it between his teeth. "Carlton and McCaffery came out from Station Eight. The next thing we know, this guy"—Lohrke jerked a thumb at the uniformed policeman—"called in."

Lohrke spat out a curse and the end of his cigar. "We only got one chance to beat this murder and suicide gag. It coulda been a frame." He flipped his thumb to the doorway. "The Hunt Club's upstairs. Carlton and McCaffery pulled the raid last week."

Lohrke went on to give the details, but Ragan's mind, already familiar with them, raced on ahead. The Hunt Club was nothing but an elaborate set-up for the racing crowd. Occupying half of the second floor of the four-storied building, it was a sumptuously furnished hangout with direct wires to all race tracks.

The raid Carlton and McCaffery staged netted forty-one gamblers and the four men who ran the place. Two of them were big names in the gambling world. Five thousand dollars' worth of furnishings had been confiscated. The four men were out on heavy bail as third offenders.

Ragan turned abruptly, stepped around Carlton's body without looking at it, and went into the musty, dimly lighted hallway. The elevator cage had an "Out of Order" sign on it and Ragan looked at the office directory. The Hunt Club and a hairdressing place occupied the second floor. The third housed two dentists; an insurance man; two lawyers—E. C. Bar-

dell, a fellow, who, Ragan recalled, once faced disbarment proceedings for fixing a witness—and a shyster named Cohen. The fourth floor housed a mail-order establishment. Ragan swiveled his dark eyes up the ancient stairs, then went back to the sidewalk. Lohrke took up where he left off.

"It's either what it looks like," he growled, "and it coulda been—McCaffery and Carlton hated each other's guts. Or it's a plant, a frame, for revenge. We'll round up the four mugs that run that Hunt Club and see what they got to offer."

He stepped close to Ragan, as though just remembering his former warning. "But there's nothing in it for you and—"

"That's what you think." Ragan's voice was bitter. "Carlton was my friend. I don't need any dough for it—and I don't need any publicity. But get this. I don't give a good damn how it looks, Carlton didn't shoot himself. I knew him too well for that, knew his sister—"

Ragan broke off suddenly as the word formed on his lips. His sister! Blanche Carlton. Geez! Somebody'd have to tell her and—

He turned abruptly from Lohrke, stepped onto the pavement and started for the corner. The lieutenant went slack-jawed for a moment, finally said: "Hey! Where the hell you goin'?"

Ragan did not answer. He had his head down and he moved on in long, stiff-kneed strides until an automobile horn jarred his mind back to the moment. He looked up as a taxi purred slowly past. In the next instant his eyes fastened on a white, dark-eyed face pressed tight to the glass of a rear window. It was a woman's face—he could make out the mass of black hair that framed it—and she was staring at the tableau of death on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER TWO

317 Wayne Street

RAGAN found a taxi at the second corner. He stopped at a drug store for a pint of whisky, and fifteen minutes later he was knocking at the door of the apartment shared by Carlton and his sister.

He had to knock three times and wait several minutes before a woman's voice said: "Who is it?"

Ragan answered and the door opened, framing a tall, clear-skinned girl, who wore feathered mules and a green corduroy robe over her silk pajamas. Like her brother, she was blond, blue-eyed. Trim brows lifted in surprise and the full-lipped mouth curved in a doubtful smile.

"Why, Sam, what—"

"C'n I come in, Blanche?" Ragan interrupted, forcing a thin smile to his lips.

"Jim isn't in, but—" Blanche Carlton drew her corduroy robe tightly about her slender figure.

"It's you I want to see," Ragan said slowly.

The girl opened the door wide, stepped back. She was still smiling and she seemed about to speak again when her eyes fastened on Ragan's. The smile evaporated under the detective's grim, troubled stare; then her eyes narrowed worriedly.

Ragan dropped his gaze, shut the door. He'd been to the apartment several times and he crossed the room quickly, went to the kitchen and got a glass. When he came back to the living room he saw that the girl's face was somber, that there was a tautness about her lips that made them flat and colorless, as though she knew something was wrong and was afraid to ask.

Ragan took out the pint, broke the seal, unscrewed the cap.

"There's something wrong, Sam."

Blanche Carlton's voice was strained, low. "Something's happened. Something's happened to Jim."

Ragan poured out a small drink, kept his eyes on the glass. His voice got thick and shaky in spite of himself.

"Yeah," he said finally. "Drink this."

The girl pushed aside the glass. Her voice rose in pitch and her face blanched. "He's—is he—"

"Yes," Ragan said, and hated himself for his awkwardness. "He was shot tonight." He stepped close to the girl then as he saw her weave drunkenly. But she did not faint. She sobbed once, then the breath caught in her throat and he clamped his hands on her shoulders, gently pushed, lowered her into a chair.

He finally got her to take the whisky. And then he began to talk in a low monotone, making his sentences short and rapid, trying to keep the girl's attention. Under his persuasion she took another small drink of whisky, and he told her what had happened.

He could see her fight herself, marveled at the way she got control of her emotions. When she finally spoke, her voice was husky, quite faint.

"I knew it might happen some day," she whispered. "But it—it doesn't seem possible. I mean—" she broke off, took a breath. "But he didn't shoot himself and—"

"Of course, he didn't," Ragan said. "And that's why I'm gonna work on it. But the cops are funny. On a case like this, they don't want outsiders in on it. I want to work for you, Blanche; for myself, too. But for you so I'll have something to back me up if the police get tough."

"I'm a mugg to come here like this—when—" Ragan's long, bony face was white, miserable, as he watched the girl, but he concentrated on the issue, went

on deliberately. "I've got to get started. Have you got a dollar?"

The girl nodded dumbly toward a handbag on the table. Ragan stepped over, picked it up. Opening it, he took out a dollar bill, looked at it a moment, then shoved it in his pocket.

"That'll do it," he said grimly, and moved toward the door. There were lots of things he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the words.

"I'll leave the whisky. Take some more if you can. Try and get some sleep and—"

Someone knocked on the door.

Ragan opened it, and Lohrke and Grady stepped into the room. Lohrke glanced at the girl, then at Ragan. His big face darkened with anger and his brown eyes got sharp and bitter.

"Have you talked her into hiring you?" he rasped.

"She'll need all the help she can get," Ragan said flatly. The muscles knotted at the corners of his lean jaws.

Lohrke glanced at the girl. She sat woodenly in the chair, staring at the floor. He leaned close to Ragan.

"So that's the kind of a snake you are? Ran out on me to get here first and do your chiselin'."

Anger streaked through Ragan's brain, tinged his face crimson and flared behind his narrowed lids. His long fingers flexed, drew into fists. He took one step toward Lohrke, then changed his mind. He stepped around him and moved into the outer hall without saying a word.

RAGAN had told his taxi to wait. When he climbed in he said, "Three Seventeen Wayne Street," and took the envelope from his pocket. He found the tonneau light, turned it on. He held the envelope up to the light, saw there was an enclosure and took it out.

It was a small, twice-folded sheet and the typewritten message was brief.

See me tonight between 10:30 and 11:00.
I'll have it for you.

There was no date, no signature. He replaced the sheet, studied the envelope. The postmark was dated the day before, from the main post office. The name, Frank Wilson, meant nothing to Ragan, but he kept turning the words over and over in his head in a deliberate effort to make them mean something.

Wayne Street was only five blocks long, but there were three distinct sections in its length: business, residential, and—by the waterfront—tenement. 317 was in the middle, a down-at-the-heels, red brick apartment of four stories. There was a stone-trimmed doorway, built flush with the sidewalk, and double glass doors with the words, *The Saville*, in gilt paint. The pavement was bare except for a sedan parked farther down the street.

Ragan told the driver to wait and crossed to the dimly lighted entryway. Mail boxes set in a stucco wall told him that Frank Wilson had apartment 3-B. He climbed three steps, found the inner door unlocked and entered a small, musty foyer. The apartment was a walk-up and he climbed in the semi-darkness on stairs that had rubber stair-treads instead of carpet.

Low-watt bulbs, at the front and back of the third-floor hall, made the ends of the building clear-cut and threw a murky half-light over the area between. From some room at the rear a rhythmic, stentorian snore broke the quiet of the corridor in a weird, hollow sequence.

Apartment 3-B was at the front, on the left side. Ragan knocked at the thin-paneled door, waited several seconds; then he knocked again, louder this time, and reached for the ring of skeleton keys in his pocket. There was no sound save the rhythmic snoring which rose and fell in mocking regularity. Ragan selected one of the keys and turned the doorknob with

his left hand. The door was unlocked.

He replaced the keys, pushed on into the blackness of the room. He half shut the door, slid one hand along the near wall, feeling for a light switch.

He did not see, did not really hear a thing. It was rather that he sensed the movement behind him as the door swung shut. He drew back, threw up a protecting arm instinctively. Another arm smashed down on his, then something hard slapped down on his head.

The blow staggered him, sliced pain through his brain; but he kept his feet and spun toward his unseen assailant. A straight left caught the top of a man's head and Ragan's right shot forward, his fingers clamping on a thick throat. Then another body came hurtling through the darkness from behind.

Ragan went to his knees with the man on his back. His fingers ripped from the thick neck. There was a throaty curse. The hard object swished through the air again, smacked down flush on Ragan's battered felt. He was unconscious when he hit the floor.

RAGAN lay motionless for some minutes after opening his eyes. He was on his back, and when he raised his head the throbbing shot a nausea through his stomach that he found difficult to overcome. He finally pushed himself to a sitting position. His dull eyes found, and fixed upon, the pale blue rectangles that were the room's two windows.

The street lights outside threw the brick facade of the building opposite into sharp relief. From his position on the floor he could make out a thin stretch of star-dotted sky above the line of the roof.

He pulled his knees in close to his body and glanced down at his wrist watch. The luminous dial told him it was 12:20. He had been unconscious for about fifteen minutes.

He began to curse in a soft, bitter monotone and got shakily to his feet. He started for the direction of the door, jerked to a rigid stop as he heard soft footsteps in the hall.

He held his breath and listened. A moment later a key began to scratch in the lock. His hand slipped quickly to his shoulder holster, came out with his automatic, and his lips drew back against his teeth in a grimace of satisfaction. The key continued to rattle in the keyhole, loudly, stubbornly, balking at the attempt to unlock a door that was already unlocked.

Ragan waited, motionless. He heard the knob turn. Then the door swung slowly open and a woman stood silhouetted against the light of the hall. Ragan did not move, but his gun was up. The woman stepped slowly across the threshold, shut the door.

She moved across the floor, stumbled over something and said, "Dammit," like a sharp exhalation. Then there was a click and the room was bathed in light.

Ragan was still smiling, but his eyes were squinting and blinking, with the rush of light. The woman stood with her hand on the switch of a floor lamp and her back was turned.

"Hello, sweetheart," Ragan said.

The woman spun about. Ragan's eyes stopped blinking and widened quickly. The woman—that face was the one he had seen pressed close to the taxi window on Pearl Street.

She was about thirty, of average height, but plump, with black hair and eyes. Her face was squarish; the skin was sallow and the rouge stood out like fever spots. One hand flew to her throat and her elbow clamped to the front of her dress.

"Oh, you—what—" she began.

Ragan lowered the gun. But before he could speak the woman's frightened man-

ner had changed to hysteria and anger. She charged directly at him, started to claw him.

"Where is he?" she wailed. "What have you done to him?"

Ragan slid the trigger guard of his gun over his index finger and caught her wrists. She began to kick and he cursed once, backed her roughly to a chair. When she went over into it, he dropped down in her lap, still hanging to her wrists.

For another moment the woman struggled furiously, but she made no progress against Ragan's grip and weight, and she quieted as suddenly as she had begun. Ragan stood up, backed off.

He studied the crumpled woman a moment, then let his eyes drift around the room. He saw, now, that the place was in utter chaos. Table drawers were on the floor, their contents strewn on top of them. Cushions of the davenport had been cast aside. Drawers, empty drawers, hung half out of the small desk in the corner; the rug had been rolled back at the edges.

"They didn't get it," he said absently.

"What?" the woman asked hollowly.

"I don't know. But they didn't get it. If they had they'd've stopped looking and some part of the room would've been untouched. But it ain't. This place has been searched, plenty."

THE woman said: "What did you do with Frank?"

"I haven't seen him; that's what I came here for." Ragan told of the assault, how he had been knocked out. "I want to know," he finished, "how you happened to be down on Pearl Street after those two cops got knocked off."

"I was looking for Frank. He said he'd be back at eleven fifteen. He didn't come and—"

"Who'd he go to see?"

"I don't know."

"Well, who the hell's Frank, anyway? What's he do? How long have you known him? Where do you fit?"

"We were going to be married tomorrow. I had dinner with him tonight. He was going down on Pearl Street and—"

She stopped abruptly and her lips tightened, as though she was afraid of what she might say until she knew how Frank Wilson was involved.

"What's your name?" Ragan snapped.

"Gladys—Gladys Wentworth. I work down at the Casa Grande."

Ragan watched the woman through narrowed lids and tried to find one logical answer to what had happened. She said: "How did you get here?" Her voice was hard now and she had control of her emotions. "How do you know Frank? How do you know he lived here?"

"I don't know him, sweetheart," Ragan said, and let his voice sound disgusted. "That's what I came here for. I want to talk to him, real bad."

With slow, deliberate movements, he took the soiled envelope from his pocket, held it up, then looked down at it. "I found this down on Pearl Street—near those murdered—"

Ragan was totally unprepared for the effect of his words. It was his own fault, in a way. Over-confidence. How could he figure the dame had a .25 automatic in her handbag? But she did, and she got it out while he was looking down at the envelope. When he lifted his eyes, he stared smack into the tiny muzzle.

She came to her feet slowly. "Drop it!" she snapped.

Ragan saw the look in the black eyes, and he obeyed. He had seen that look before, and he knew that, on the edge of hysteria as she was, she was more dangerous than a professional killer. Because he could not figure her, and he was

too far away to try action, he let his arms drop, let the automatic slide from his crooked finger.

"He had that letter tonight." Gladys Wentworth began to back toward the door. "He showed me the envelope. I know—from the way that stamp was put on. Where is he? Where'd you get it?"

"I already told you," Ragan answered nonchalantly. He took a step forward.

"Stop!" The woman's trigger finger tensed and Ragan stopped. He continued to smile.

"All I want is a chance to talk to Frank and—"

"You lie!" the woman hissed, "I know what you want—why this room was searched."

She backed to the door, reached behind her and opened it. She was frightened now, but still dangerous. "Stick your nose out," she said, "and I'll let you have it."

The door closed.

Ragan took two steps forward, his thin face grimly amused. Then he swerved abruptly, stepped to one of the two windows overlooking the street. Opening it, he whistled. The second time, his driver got out of the taxi and looked up.

"There's a dame coming out," Ragan called down. "Follow her, find out where she goes. Wait for me at police headquarters."

CHAPTER THREE

The Third Death

RAGAN picked up his automatic, slipped it into his holster and began to search through the littered room. There were a few love letters, signed "Gladys"; some bills, magazines, folders of matches; a box of plain white stationery. None of these things interested Ragan. After a few minutes, he con-

tinued on to the bedroom of the apartment.

Here too, the dresser drawers had been dumped on the floor. Clothing was strewn everywhere; the bed had been pulled apart, the pillows shaken from the pillow-slips. Ragan pawed through the assortment of underwear, socks and handkerchiefs. Tangled up in a pair of tan shorts, he found half a dozen snapshots.

Four of these were views of the harbor and beach; one was of Gladys Wentworth in a bathing suit. The final snapshot brought a grunt from Ragan's throat. As he continued to study it, his lips pursed and he began to whistle a tuneless melody.

The picture showed a man and a woman in bathing suits, their arms around each other's waists. The woman was Gladys Wentworth; the man was scrawny, spindly-legged. He was no taller than the girl and his body was all straight lines and angles. His hair was straight, and on end, as though he had just finished a swim.

Ragan said, "Tony Avellar," softly and thrust all the snapshots in his pocket.

He turned off the bedroom light, went back through the living room and downstairs to the dimly lighted entryway. The last mail box in the long row had a card tacked at the bottom that said, *Janitor*. Ragan pushed the button, held it with his thumb for several seconds.

He lit a cigarette, alternately puffed and pressed the buzzer button. In about five minutes a tall, stooped man with a bald head emerged from behind the main staircase. He wore a long-sleeved undershirt, trousers and carpet slippers. He was muttering angrily when he opened the door, but Ragan did not give him a chance to speak.

He took out the snapshot of the two on the beach, stepped close to the janitor, handed him the picture. At the same time

he took a dollar bill from his pocket and held it loosely.

"You know this guy?" he asked crisply.

The janitor squinted at the picture, scowled up at Ragan. "A hell of a fine time it is," he grumbled, "to come askin' such—" His eyes found the dollar bill and he stopped abruptly. His jaw twisted slightly and he rubbed his chin, said, "Yeah."

"Got an apartment here?"

"Yeah. Frank Wilson, his name is."

"How long's he been here?"

The janitor began to scowl again. "Three months. Mebbe more, mebbe less."

"What's he do?"

"How should I know? He pays his rent prompt, that's what interests me."

"You're sure this is Frank Wilson?"

"Didn't I say so?" The janitor snapped this petulantly and grabbed for the dollar bill. Ragan made no attempt to hold it. His long face cracked in a grin and he turned without answering and moved to the street door. The janitor glared after him, took a hitch in his trousers and slammed the inner door.

THE taxi driver was waiting when, twenty minutes later, Ragan got out of another cab in front of headquarters.

"How'd you make out?" Ragan said. "Follow her all right?"

"I didn't have to." The driver, a short, freckle-faced fellow with glasses, began to grin. "She hopped right into my cab when she came out."

"What's the address?"

"Six Eighty-nine Monroe Street—on the south side."

Ragan jotted down the address on a card, slipped it into his vest pocket. "Just after I went in that apartment," he said, "two guys came out. What'd they look like?"

The driver scratched his head. "One

was a big bruiser with a black felt hat; the other was a little guy. I can't remember much, but—"

"Where'd they go?"

"They got in that sedan down the street. I think there was a guy waiting for 'em."

Ragan grunted. "O. K. I'm not through yet, but I'll pay you now—or you can wait."

"I'll wait," the driver said.

Ragan climbed the worn stone steps of police headquarters, swung through the bronze doorway and turned left into a long hall on the first floor. At the far end he pushed open a door marked, *Telegraph Bureau*.

A teletype was chattering and a fellow in uniformed trousers and shirt sleeves was battering a typewriter in one corner of the room. Beyond a glass partition an announcer was speaking silently into a microphone. Ragan spoke to the sergeant behind the massive roll-top desk.

"You got anything new on Tony Avellar, Mike?"

Mike, a beetle-browed Irishman, clasped his hands behind his thick neck and cocked one eyebrow at Ragan.

"What," he asked, "would guys like you do without guys like me to answer your questions?"

Ragan grinned, lit a cigarette and offered one to Mike. It was refused. When he spoke his tone was humorous and did not betray his intense interest.

"Is it a secret?"

"No," Mike drawled.

"You got him here? Is he where I can talk with him?"

"He ain't here, and you can't talk with him," Mike said, grinning. "But you can talk to him—talk your head off. He's in the morgue."

"Morgue?" Ragan burst out. "When—"

"That's the funny part of it. That's what makes me wonder about guys like

you. We only got word ten minutes ago. And now you come bustin' in all het up about him. Does he owe you dough?"

The last was lost on Ragan. He called, "Much obliged, Mike," and was through the doorway before the sentence was finished.

Flynn, a pensioned veteran, was on duty at the morgue. Ragan knew him well. He found him playing two-handed pinochle with a man from the *Star*. He waited until the hand was finished, then got Flynn to one side. He told him what he wanted and Flynn led him down a cool, tiled corridor that smelled of formaldehyde. They went into a small room on the right and Flynn turned on the light. A sheet-covered form lay on a wheeled table; Flynn apologized for its presence.

"We ain't had time to put him away yet," he said.

Ragan pulled the sheet from the man's face. It was a thin, blue-white mask and the eyes were closed. He pulled the sheet down to the waist. There were two bluish holes in the scrawny chest: one on the left side near the heart; the other diagonally lower on the other side of the body.

THIS picture had little in common with the scene Ragan had witnessed earlier. If he felt any emotion at the sight of the lifeless body of Tony Avellar, he was not conscious of it. Avellar was a chiseler, a rat. Formerly a small-time crook, he had for the past year been driving a taxi. He had a police record for numerous petty offenses and his last appearance had happened four months before.

At that time a jury foreman had been mysteriously murdered. Avellar, driving a taxi at the time, had been nearby. He was picked up by the police, grilled, held for nearly a month as a material witness

while they tried to find the killer. But Avellar had finally been released on a thousand dollars bail, and he had not been seen since.

Ragan jerked his thoughts back to the present, shrugged. "Help me turn him over," he said. "I want to see if—"

Flynn jerked the sheet back over the face, grunted impatiently. "I'll tell you without looking. One slug came out; the other is still in him."

"Lohrke see him?"

"No."

"Where'd they find him? A ride?"

"Yeah. Dumped out at the side of the road near the railroad yards—out Readville way."

"Just come in, huh?" Ragan turned toward the door, stopped with one hand on the jamb. "Examiner didn't recover the slug in him yet, huh?"

Flynn sighed and turned out the light. "I guess not. And now will you get the hell out of here? It ain't often I can get a guy at this time of night that'll play pinochle."

The man from the *Star* buttonholed Ragan when he came back to the rotunda, but Ragan stalled, kidded a moment or so and then stepped to one of the two telephone booths near the entrance. It took him nearly five minutes to get his number. Then the sleepy voice of Todd, Ragan's assistant, mumbled a thick "Hello."

"I got a job for you," Ragan said.

"Who the hell're you?"

"Me—Ragan, you cluck."

"Oh—when?"

"Now."

"My Gawd," Todd moaned, his voice wide awake now. "How about my sleep?"

"How about mine?" growled Ragan. He hesitated, grinning wryly while Todd worked out his string of curses. Then he added, "It's two o'clock now—and it's my turn to sleep."

He went on in short clipped sentences to tell Todd what had happened, about the murder of McCaffery and Carlton, about Avellar. Todd was eager with interest when Ragan finished.

"What do I do?"

"Get a flashlight and go down on Pearl Street. I got a hunch that some place around there you'll find a slug."

"The one that went through Avellar?"

"Yeah."

"And all I got to do," Todd said drily, "is to find it some place in that block?"

"That's all," Ragan said. "But it won't be as hard as it sounds. It's probably pretty close to that doorway—number Four Fifty-eight."

"It'll be hard," growled Todd, "even the way you tell it. What do I do if I find it?"

"Take a run down to my apartment and wake me up. One of us might as well be sleeping."

Ragan grinned and hung up on the newly released series of curses. If there was a slug, Todd would find it. Of that he was sure.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Missing Slug

RAGAN let Todd in his apartment at eight the next morning. He had just finished his shower. As he opened the door he was a tall gaunt figure in a blue bathrobe, black hair tousled, his dark skin fresh and shiny from his shave.

Todd came into the comfortably furnished living room, crossed to the divan without a word and flopped down upon it. Physically he was the exact opposite of Ragan. Short, round-bodied with straw-colored hair, blue eyes and glasses. His suit, rounded by his body, had no press; his brown felt was shapeless.

"How's for a drink?" he asked.

Ragan went to the kitchenette, got a

bottle of Scotch, half filled, a glass and a siphon. He knew from Todd's attitude that the little man had found what he went after. And thinking about it, he was glad Todd worked for him. One of these days, he'd make him a partner. He'd hired him as an office boy. And with no training Todd had, in two years, become invaluable in routine investigations.

Ragan went back to the living room. Todd reached for the bottle and glass, said, "Never mind the fixings," and poured out an inch and a half of whisky. He downed it in one gulp, lit a cigarette and settled back on the divan.

For a few moments, Ragan did not speak. His mind, working with a machine-like precision, was reviewing the case as he saw it. He put together each bit of information at his command.

He did not have many answers yet, but he had more than a good start. The letter, leading him to Frank Wilson—Tony Avellar—had been a break, pure and simple. If he had not arrived at Pearl Street just when he did Lohrke would eventually have found that envelope.

That bloodstain on the sidewalk was what really started his hunch, though. Lohrke, angry, vengeful at the sight of the two murdered policemen, had let his mind get balled up. That bloodstain was not from McCaffery. Ragan had been sure of that at the time. McCaffery had not bled enough for that, not enough to make that two-inch splotch before he fell.

Ragan thought he knew now where the blood had come from—Avellar. But it would take the missing slug to prove it. If it checked. . . . But why had Avellar gone to 458 Pearl Street? Who was he after? Or was it just a gag to put him on the spot? Even if this idea hooked up it did not explain how McCaffery and Carlton—

"Well," Todd growled in interruption, "there it is." He tossed a partly flattened lead slug on the table. "And I only just found it. All night I look. Then I find it way back in the hall of Number Four Fifty-eight—in the fifth step of those stairs."

Ragan picked up the bullet, turned it over and over in his hand. Sucking thoughtfully on his lower lip, he crossed to the telephone near the door and asked for police headquarters.

"Hello, Lohrke," he said a few seconds later. "Ragan. Yeah. Did you recover that slug from Avellar's body. . . ? You did, but you been busy on that cop-killer thing? Sure. . . . I ain't seen the papers yet, but get this. I think I got the other slug that burned Avellar. I'll be down after while."

LOHJRKE, a cigar stub jutting from clamped jaws, was pacing back and forth across his office when Ragan entered. Two newspapers were spread across his desk and Ragan stepped over, glanced at the headlines. It was all there, just as Lohrke had feared.

TWO POLICEMEN SLAIN WITH OFFICER'S GUN

Ragan's mouth took on a tautness that curved his thin lips in a weird smile. He read quickly down the page until he came to a paragraph that began—

But the physical circumstances also support the theory that Carlton killed McCaffery and then shot himself in a sudden fit of insanity or anger. There has been some talk of bad blood between the two men, and Carlton was an excellent marksman. The wound in his head was a contact wound, meaning the gun was pressed against his temple. . . .

Ragan swore bitterly. He thumbed quickly through the pages of the newspaper, scanning them briefly. He found

what he wanted on Page 12. Avellar's death got two paragraphs.

Lohrke stopped pacing and strode angrily to his desk. "What's this about the other slug that got Avellar?"

Ragan took it from his pocket and passed it to the lieutenant. "Have it checked. If it's from the same gun as the slug in his body I'll tell you where I got it."

Lohrke, grumbling, got on the telephone and summoned the ballistic expert. It was not until the expert had left with the bullet that the lieutenant spoke again to Ragan.

"I don't think it matters a damn one way or the other," he said then. "I thought you were working for Blanche Carlton?"

"You ought to know," snapped Ragan angrily. "You popped off about it, didn't you?"

Lohrke's pink face reddened. He sat down and wiped a hand over the top of his head, which was bald nearly to the crown. When he spoke the red crept up into this bald lane.

"She told me the deal you made," he said awkwardly. "About the dollar. That crack I made—well, hell. You know I ain't got anything against you. But I was—"

Ragan went back to a chair and collapsed into it like a folding card table. "I told you," he said evenly, picking up the newspaper again. "I told you down on Pearl Street I wasn't in this thing for the dough or publicity."

He stretched his long legs, surveyed the tips of his oxfords. "But I was a cop long enough to hate cop killers—and Carlton was my friend."

"You got something," Lohrke accused. "Spill it."

"If I did, it would gum up your idea that the racetrack crowd was mixed up in it."

Lohrke took the cigar that was now two inches tobacco pulp and one inch cigar, from his mouth. He spat once, jammed the pulp back into his mouth, and said: "It's already gummed. Everyone of those four guys Carlton and McCaffery pulled are clean as a whistle." He hesitated, glared at Ragan. "But hell, it's gotta either be murder and suicide like the coroner's jury's gonna make out, or it was a frame."

"Some guy called in about the jewelry store, some guy that knew McCaffery and Carlton would go out on it. Nobody could pull Carlton's gun on him—he musta been stuck up and—"

The ballistic expert stuck his nose in the door.

"The slug checks with the one we got from Avellar. Do you want I should keep it?"

Ragan turned in the chair. "Yeah. Label it and keep it."

The ballistic man withdrew.

"Now," snapped Lohrke, "where did you get it?"

"Todd found it," Ragan said. He took out a cigarette. "Found it in the stairs in the back hall of Number Four Fifty-eight."

"How'd he know where to look?" Lohrke's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I told him about it."

"You—" He stopped, seeming to have run out of words.

RAGAN slouched in the chair, lit his cigarette, and held up the newspaper, talking as he read. "I found an envelope . . ." he began. Then he told Lohrke of his trip to the address on Wayne Street, of what happened there and what he found.

As he was finishing his story, Ragan's eye caught in the newspaper a sentence that jerked him erect in the chair. The sentence read—

The owners of the Hunt Club have retained attorney E. C. Bardell to defend them.

Ragan threw the newspaper aside, picked up a telephone book and scribbled down an address on a slip of paper. "My Gawd," he choked. "Am I dumb?" He pulled his hat down, jerked to his feet.

Lohrke, his mouth gaping, said: "Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna have a talk with this Gladys Wentworth. Wanta come?"

Lohrke hesitated. Ragan's lip curled and he blew a jet of smoke up past the end of his nose. "Or maybe," he sneered, "you don't like the company; maybe it would hurt your reputation to be seen with a private dick."

"It ain't that, only—"

Ragan moved toward the door. "I've played it this far alone. I guess I can finish it."

Lohrke cursed and got to his feet. He moved to a clothes-tree, snatched off his hat.

"You'd better bring a gun," Ragan said.

"For the dame?"

"She's only the first act."

Lohrke went back to his desk, opened the center drawer and took out his service revolver. He slipped it in his hip pocket and the two men went out.

SIX EIGHTY-NINE Monroe was a slate-colored frame building in the middle of a drab, uninviting block. Judging by the style of architecture in evidence, the neighborhood had, at one time, been rather a fashionable one. Now it was definitely third class and most of the houses had "Rooms To Let" signs in first-floor windows.

Ragan and Lohrke went up the wide wooden steps, rang the bell. A plump, red-faced woman with stringy hair and an orange wrapper answered the ring.

"Does Gladys Wentworth live here?" Ragan asked.

"Yes."

"She in?"

"No."

"When'll she be back?"

"I don't know, I'm sure." The woman shrugged indifferently. "She went out with two men about ten minutes ago, and—"

Ragan stiffened. "One of 'em big, with a dark hat and—"

"Yes."

Ragan spun about and took Lohrke by the arm. The lieutenant's voice was sardonic. "Annie doesn't live here any more."

Ragan began to swear, but he did not speak. They got into the taxi. "Four Fifty-eight Pearl Street," Ragan directed.

"She run out on you," Lohrke's voice was bitter. "You shoulda come out here last night—or told me about it."

"I thought she'd keep," Ragan snapped. "You knew she'd see about Avellar in the papers—"

"She didn't know Avellar. He was Frank Wilson to her. But I clean forgot that those hoods might have known about her."

"The two that slugged you last night?" "Yeah," growled Ragan. "It looks like we go to work." His manner had nothing of the easy nonchalance shown in Lohrke's office. His thin lips were tight and his eyes were smoldering. "Now I know I'm right."

"Well," said Lohrke impatiently. "Spill it!"

Ragan's voice was harsh, bitter. "You said it was murder and suicide, or else a plant."

"What else could it be?"

"An accident."

"Accident?" Lohrke was incredulous. "Don't tell me—"

"Listen. The guy that phoned in about

the jewelry store was on the level. It was a tip. Two guys *were* hanging around that entrance—the two hoods that jumped me. But they were waiting for Avellar and—”

“Geez!” interrupted Lohrke, stiffening on the seat. “Then you were right about that blood on the sidewalk. You mean they gave him the slug and right after that, before they could load him in a car, McCaffery and Carlton came up and—”

“That’s the idea,” said Ragan grimly. “But it ain’t all of it. If it was, those two hoods woulda opened up on Carlton and McCaffery. But they didn’t. Whoever figured out this murder and suicide gag had brains. It was no cheap hood that doped that out.

“Remember that jury foreman that got knocked off four months ago? Well, suppose Avellar *had* seen it. Suppose he was doin’ a bit of blackmailin’. He was a rat anyway, and that letter I found sounds like it. ‘I’ll have it for you tonight.’”

“But—” Lohrke began.

“Gawd,” Ragan snorted, “I was dumb. Who was the defense lawyer in that case where the foreman got murdered?”

“Bardell—Ed Bardell.”

Ragan took out the slip of paper he had used to jot down the number he had taken from the telephone book in Lohrke’s office. But Lohrke did not look at it.

“Hell!” he wheezed. “Bardell’s office is at Four Fifty-eight Pearl Street. I knew that, but I never hooked it up—”

“Yeah,” Ragan said dryly. “And what did those two hoods want in Avellar’s place last night? Your guess is as good as mine. There musta been other letters. But they didn’t find ‘em. That girl must have ‘em.”

The taxi eased to a stop on Pearl Street. Lohrke paid the driver and started for the entrance to 458. Ragan grabbed him.

“No. You wait across the street. If I come out with Bardell—”

“To hell with that,” snapped Lohrke. “I’m goin’ up and—”

“You’re a cop,” barked Ragan. “We aint got enough proof for you to work on Bardell. He’s a lawyer and he might have you up before the trial board. But me”—Ragan thumped his chest—“I’m only a private dick. I got no badge to lose. He might get me for assault, but I can stand it.” He pushed Lohrke off the curb, spun about and went through the narrow entrance and up the wooden stairs.

Bardell’s office was at the end of the third-floor corridor, a narrow, stuffy hall whose ancient floorboards creaked protestingly with Ragan’s passing weight. He slipped his automatic from his holster, transferred it to his coat pocket. Then he opened the door.

Bardell, his back turned, was talking on the telephone. He apparently heard the door open. “Wait for me,” he said. He hung up, and brushed something on the desk in front of him into an open drawer. At one end of the desk, in a leather-upholstered arm chair, sat Gladys Wentworth.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pay-off

GLADYS WENTWORTH jerked up in her chair and stared at Ragan with eyes that were wide and frightened. Her face was very pale, and white-knuckled hands gripped the chair arms.

Bardell turned slowly in his swivel chair. He was a shrewd-looking man of about forty with sleek brown hair, a tiny mustache, and a well tailored, expensive-looking checked suit. His gray-green eyes fastened on Ragan, narrowed shiftily.

“Well,” he drawled. “What do you want?”

Gladys Wentworth spoke in a low, strained voice. "That's the man I told you about."

Bardell's jaw went slack for a moment, but he recovered himself quickly, wet his lips. "So you're one of those hoods that calls himself a private dick, huh?"

Ragan moved easily around the desk, his hand still in his pocket. He spoke to the woman.

"Maybe you're collectin' for Frank." He hesitated, trying to figure a logical answer. The woman, her attitude last night, made him feel that she had been on the level about Avellar. He did not think she knew of his death. His guess was that Bardell had cooked up a plausible story to tell her and get her out of town. He decided to gamble that his hunches were correct.

"You had those other letters, huh?" he asked. The woman did not answer and her eyes shifted anxiously to Bardell.

"Get out, Ragan," the lawyer said.

Ragan moved to the girl, his lanky height towering over her. "Where's Frank?"

"He had to leave town." This sullenly.

"Hah," Ragan jerked. "And he was doing some work for Bardell here, maybe, and Bardell is going to pay you—"

Bardell had reached for the telephone. Ragan, leaning quickly toward him, slapped the instrument from his hand. He took the snapshots out of his pocket, told the woman where he found them.

"Is this a shot of you and Frank Wilson?" he asked. Gladys Wentworth nodded and Ragan laughed grimly. "To you Frank Wilson—to the cops, Tony Avellar."

"I don't know what you mean."

"His right name was Tony Avellar."

"I don't care what his name was," the woman said defiantly. "We're going to be married and—"

"That's what you think." Ragan reached across the desk and snatched up a copy of the morning *Call*. He spread it open at Page 12. Keeping his eyes alternately on Bardell and the newspaper, he pointed to the two paragraphs about Avellar's death. He meant to break the news brutally in the hope that the effect would make the girl turn on Bardell.

"You're boy friend's in the morgue," he snapped, "and Bardell put him there!"

Gladys Wentworth screamed, and went over against the desk in a dead faint. Bardell's hand snaked to a desk drawer. He had a gun in his hand by the time Ragan reached him, but he never used it.

The detective knocked the gun hand against the edge of the desk. He jerked Bardell from the chair and then smashed his fist flush to Bardell's mouth. The lawyer went over backward.

Ragan stepped closer. Bardell staggered to his feet and the detective grabbed him, pulled him close. "You oughta be glad it's me and not a real cop," he snarled. "To a cop, you're a cop killer. To me"—Ragan lost control of his voice and emotions, shouted the words—"all you did was murder one of my best friends."

He punctuated the sentence with a right hook that started from his hips. The shock in his forearm as his fist smashed to Bardell's chin, shook him clear to the shoulder. Bardell stiffened and went forward on his face.

RAGAN began to curse in a soft, bitter voice. He knew he still lacked some proof, but he was sure he was right, and he was counting on the girl.

He opened the center desk drawer. There was a stack of crisp, new twenty-dollar bills; beneath them four letters in envelopes like the one he had found last night. He put them on the desk, then pushed the girl back into the chair. She

opened her eyes then, and he told her what he knew of the story.

Bardell began to stir on the floor.

"All his life," Ragan continued to the girl, "Bardell's been fixing juries—or trying to fix 'em—bribe witnesses. Probably the foreman of that one jury was going to spill what he knew. All you got to do is tell the truth—but you can stretch it a bit if you want. Bardell'll like that. You want to get the man that murdered Avellar, don't you?"

Gladys Wentworth nodded dumbly. Ragan stepped to a typewriter desk, slipped a piece of paper in the machine, tapped off a sentence. He studied it for a moment, said: "It checks all right, Bardell. That machine wrote all these letters. It's as good as your signature."

He went back to the desk, picked up the money and letters, shoved them in his coat pocket. Then he jerked Bardell to his feet.

"Let's go," he growled. "Over to your apartment. If we wait long enough those two hoods might show up."

They went down the hall and started down the stairs. Bardell was about a foot in the lead and Ragan followed, the gun in his pocket, the girl at his side.

THE ground-floor hall was deserted; a sliver of morning sunlight slid through the street entrance and made a yellow slash along one drab wall. Past the frame of the doorway pedestrians scurried along; beyond them an intermittent line of cars and taxis rolled slowly in the street. Bardell stepped through the doorway, Ragan and the girl just behind.

Ragan had one foot on the sidewalk when he saw the car at the curb, the man at the wheel—and leaning against the front fender, the big man with the black felt hat. His right hand was in his pocket.

In that instant, before Bardell yelled,

Ragan knew what the lawyer had meant when he hung up the telephone. "Wait for me." Not at his apartment, but right here, with an automobile.

"Get him—and the girl!"

The words ripped from Bardell's throat and at the same moment he leaped aside, for the entrance to the stationery store.

Ragan ignored him. He saw the big man's gun glint in the sunlight; then his own gun was out. He reached out with his left, made a flat-hand swipe that caught the girl on the side of the head and knocked her sprawling toward Bardell. A woman screamed. Men began to curse. The pedestrians on the sidewalk scattered. Then the guns roared.

Ragan fired a fraction of a second ahead of the big man, and his hand was very steady. He saw the fellow's body jerk an instant before the gun whipped up in recoil. Ragan felt the slug rip across the inside of his left arm, but knew it did not strike a bone because there was little jar.

He squeezed the trigger again and pivoted toward the man in the front seat of the sedan. This fellow had little chance. He got his gun out, but cramped there on the seat, he lacked the freedom for proper aim. He fired once, wildly, then Ragan let him have it. His head bobbed back. He crumpled over on the seat.

A curious, indignant thought sliced through Ragan's brain as he turned back to the big gunman. "Where the hell was Lohrke?"

The big man fell forward as Ragan watched him. The gun slipped from his grasp and skidded clear across the sidewalk; Gladys Wentworth was crawling on her hands and knees for the shelter of the stationery shop's entrance. The big man pushed up, got his knees under him; then he went flat on his face, lifeless.

RAGAN took one step toward the girl, stopped short. The big man's gun had skidded close to Bardell's feet. The lawyer snatched it up; at the same time he jerked the girl to her feet. Ragan, his gun up and ready, faced a sight that sent an icy finger racing along his spine.

Bardell, holding the girl as a shield, had hunched his head below her shoulder. The muzzle of the big man's gun poked over that shoulder and leveled at Ragan.

Ragan aimed, knew he did not dare shoot. He jumped wildly to one side as Bardell's gun crashed. He lifted his own gun, hesitated, started to leap for the shelter of the doorway. Then Bardell's body jerked from behind the girl and another shot reverberated through the street.

Bardell staggered. Gladys Wentworth collapsed at his feet. Ragan turned. In the center of the pavement, now cleared of all traffic, Lohrke, spread-legged and rigid, was lowering a stiff, parallel arm that ended in his service revolver. Ragan looked back at Bardell just as the lawyer sprawled down on top of the girl.

The two gunmen were dead. Bardell, propped up against the side of the stationery store, was conscious. But he must have realized he was through. He was no longer antagonistic or defiant. Ragan and Lohrke knelt beside him.

"You're lucky, Bardell," Lohrke said. "Lucky you won't live to stand trial. You ain't got but a few minutes. You'd better come clean."

"Sure." Bardell breathed with an effort. "Sure. Why not? Avellar had it coming anyway. He'd a' milked me of every dime I had. I called him to my office last night. I talked with him a while—till I knew the boys would be outside. Then I walked down the stairs with him. They let him have it. . . ."

The lawyer's words trailed off in a fit of coughing. It was some seconds before he continued. "The cops got here just as

they loaded Avellar into the car. I was back in the doorway—they didn't see me. I knew the jig was up anyway, but I flashed the idea—the only idea I had left. Murder and suicide with a police gun. Because I recognized Carlton and McCaffery, knew they'd had trouble together.

"I came out behind Carlton, stuck him up. I told McCaffery I'd let Carlton have it if he argued. Then I just took Carlton's gun out and shoved it up to his head and—"

Ragan, his face dead white and rigid, began to curse. Bardell went on: "—and it was all over in a second. I had nothing to lose. I was hooked for the chair, anyway. That letter—that musta dropped out of Avellar's pocket when they bundled him into the car. If it wasn't for that I'd. . . ." The words trailed off.

Ragan stood up. His hands were shaking and his lip was wet with sweat. He rubbed his coat sleeve across his face. His arm was bleeding quite a lot.

A taxi load of reporters and photographers spilled out on the sidewalk and milled around him. When they exploded their questions, Ragan felt a tired grin pull at his mouth.

"Just say," he told them, "that Lieutenant Lohrke, together with Sam Ragan, the well-known private detective—Hell, Lohrke can give you the story."

He stepped into the street and flagged a cab. Lohrke stepped close, brushed aside the reporters. "Where you going?" he demanded.

"I gotta get a bandage on this flipper," Ragan said. "An' I'm goin' to see Blanche Carlton. I had to break her the bad news last night. I'd like to tell her about this. It ain't good news—but it might help some."

He climbed into the cab. "Hell," he growled, "I ain't workin' for you—I'm workin' for my client. I've gotta earn that one-buck fee, ain't I?"

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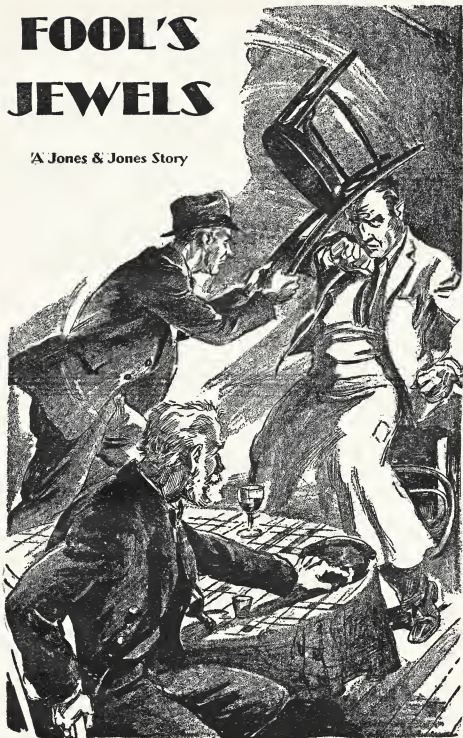
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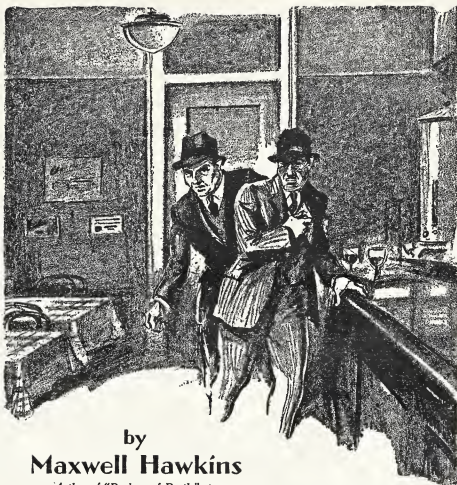
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WHAT A LINE-UP!

FOOL'S JEWELS

A Jones & Jones Story





by
Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Duchess of Death," etc.

From a sleepy little fishing village on the Maine coast had come the obscure newspaper item that set the Brothers Jones off on the maddest mystery of their amazing career. "Why should even the meanest thief in the world steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes?" they asked themselves. And why should murder follow in the wake of those two corroded coppers, after the theft?

CHAPTER ONE

Pennies Off A Dead Man's Eyes

SEATED at his desk in the office of Jones and Jones, in the Flatiron Building, Mr. Horatio Jones, the junior member of the firm, was busily

occupying himself with the big stack of newspapers piled before him.

It was a warm day, even though the season was early autumn. The intensity of his exertions brought tiny beads of moisture to Horatio's brow and bald head. His mild blue eyes, however, continued to

glide relentlessly up and down the columns.

Suddenly his glance came to a full stop. He bent over, in order to read a small story down in one corner of the page more easily. For some time he concentrated on it. Then, with a faint clucking sound, he lifted his shears.

There was a brisk snipping. He rose from his chair, crossed the room. Beside his older brother—older by some ten minutes—he paused. Leander, the senior of the Jones twins, was deep in a ponderous volume. Something to do with the development of Assyrian art.

"Dear me," Horatio murmured. "What do you make of this, Leander?"

Leander looked up from his book, accepted the proffered clipping. As he read, a puzzled frown crinkled above his pale blue eyes. He shook his head slowly. "My word, Horatio!"

HORATIO'S habit of cutting certain odd and often deeply buried items out of the papers, was both a pleasant pastime to him and a matter of business to Jones and Jones.

Frequently in these bits of newsprint, he came upon a thread that he and Leander could pick up. Sometimes, they would find the other end of the thread snarled in a hidden crime. And the unraveling of such hidden crimes was both the vocation and the avocation of the Jones brothers. It was their vocation, because to it they devoted their entire time. It was their avocation, since they did not do it for profit. Their private inherited fortunes were more than ample for their needs.

Leander dropped his gaze again to the clipping and even more carefully read it a second time.

WORLD'S MEANEST THIEF IS DISCOVERED IN MAINE

Hollis Harbor, Me., Oct. 9—This Maine fishing village can lay claim to having received a visit from the meanest thief in the world. He was a thief who proved it by carrying out an old saying. He stole the pennies off a dead man's eyes.

Two days ago Captain Ira Condit died in a seamen's home in New York. His body was brought to Hollis Harbor yesterday for burial in the local churchyard.

In his will, Captain Condit requested that before he was lowered into his grave, two pennies be put upon his eyes, in accordance with an old and once common custom. The coins, two large coppers, were found among his effects.

During the night, while his body was lying in the coffin in the home of Henry Condit, the captain's nephew, someone broke in and stole the two pennies.

Captain Condit, who was seventy-seven years old when he died, was a native of Hollis Harbor. For more than forty years he was master of deep-water sailing ships. He left the sea about ten years ago and had lived at the seamen's home up to the time of his death.

Leander placed the clipping upon the open page of his book. He wiggled his eyebrows up and down several times, rubbed the back of an ear with a contemplative forefinger.

"Two pennies," he mused, and then repeated—"Two pennies."

"Off a dead man's eyes," Horatio added. "My-my!"

"Why would anyone steal such a trivial sum?"

"Why would anyone want to be buried with them on his eyes?" Horatio asked.

Leander considered. "Perhaps, I can answer that part," he said finally. "The old sea captain must have been superstitious. I believe that in the old days, the custom was based on two ideas. In the first place, it was so the deceased would have money in the other world. In China today, colored paper is burned, which it is expected, will provide funds for the dead Chinese in heaven. And in parts of Greece, they put a coin in the hand

of the corpse to pay the cost of being ferried over the River Styx." Leander paused, as if he had forgotten what he was talking about and was lost in thought.

"What was the other reason?" Horatio prompted him.

"Purely a practical one, my dear Horatio," Leander replied, smiling faintly. "To keep the eyelids of the cadaver closed."

He rose from his chair, walked to the window, stared out over Madison Square with a faraway look. Horatio, watching him, knew that Leander was trying to visualize the news story he had just read.

The Jones brothers were identical twins. As they stood there in that modest office, it was almost impossible to tell them apart. The same rosy faces and bald heads; the same short, slender, but well-knit figures. Even their clothes were alike—wrinkled gray suits. And an air of meekness and self-effacement clung to both of them.

At last Leander turned. His lips were twisted into a funny little smile, and his eyes held an eager twinkle. "There's more behind this than two pennies," he said.

"Dear me, yes!" Horatio agreed. "But what?"

"We shall try to discover."

The firm of Jones and Jones was accustomed to act with promptness and efficiency. So there was nothing extraordinary in Leander's quick decision to dig into the mystery of the theft of two pennies from the eyes of the dead sea captain. Less unique and suspicious circumstances had set them off on a crime hunt before.

With a brisk and eager step, Leander crossed to a hat tree in one corner of their office. He took down two brown, soft hats. One he handed to Horatio; the other he snapped upon his own head.

"Let us start, Horatio!"

"To Maine?"

"Exactly," Leander smiled. "I go to Maine—but not you."

"And where do I go?"

"I'll explain as we ride uptown."

ON THE train to Boston, Leander read and reread the odd little story Horatio had clipped from the newspaper. The dateline, he observed, was October 9, and the account said the strange and ghoulish theft had taken place the preceding night. It was now the Twelfth of October. Captain Condit's body must have been consigned to its last resting place for at least two days.

Perhaps upon his sightless eyes other pennies had been placed in deference to his last wish. Leander smiled grimly at the thought. Then his smile faded. What if the original coins, the large old-fashioned copper pieces, had been found? It would mean he was on a wild goose chase.

For a few seconds his blue eyes clouded; then he gave a little philosophical shrug. It wouldn't be the first time he had run down a lead that amounted to nothing.

Yet some uncanny instinct told him that behind the theft of the two pennies lay a deep and sinister motive. It was not the work of a crude practical joker, or a necromaniac—one whose mental twist drives him to mutilate the dead.

Arriving in Boston shortly before midnight, Leander spent the night at a hotel. He caught a train early in the morning for Portland. From there, he headed farther down into Maine on a motorbus, the only means of transportation that would bring him anywhere near Hollis Harbor.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have enjoyed the ride. But he was too preoccupied with what might lie ahead of him to notice the beautiful scenery through which they passed. Stretches of

pine and hemlock, beyond which glimpses of the sea, sparkling in the sun, were visible now and then.

It was with a feeling of relief that he saw the driver turn around and catch his eye. He slid from his seat into the narrow aisle and from the wide low rack above where he had been sitting, he took down his scuffed black bag.

By the time he had made his way to the head of the aisle, the bus was almost stopped. The driver turned to him.

"You take that gravel road to the right. It's about three miles."

"Thank you. Thank you very much," Leander murmured.

The driver gave him a sort of salute. "Like to take you over. But we don't go there, except during the season. Season's over now." He reached out, seized the handle of the lever that opened the door.

"My word! Season?"

"Sure. Lotta folks have cottages around the harbor. But you won't find anybody there at this time of year except the natives." The door swung open.

"I see. Thank you." Leander stepped down to the concrete pavement.

"Well, good luck!" the driver called cheerily.

The door slammed shut. A burst from the engine, accompanied by a grating of gears, and the bus moved rapidly up the road in a haze of blue-gray smoke.

Leander looked about him. He was in the midst of a forest of second-growth pine, through which the white highway cut like a thin scar. To the right, the gravel road the driver had pointed out disappeared around a bend into the woods. Leander picked up his bag and started toward Hollis Harbor.

He hoped vaguely that someone in a car might come along and give him a lift, although tramping along the gravel with

the bracing tang of pine in his nostrils was not without a certain pleasure.

But so far as meeting anyone was concerned, the entire country seemed to be uninhabited. For a mile, he passed not a single house. Then the trees began to thin out a little, and back a distance of a hundred yards he made out a low white structure, the house proper joined to the barn. Beyond it lay cleared fields, now sere and brown.

Leander trudged on. A quarter of a mile ahead, the road made an abrupt turn, and as he fastened his eyes upon it, a car appeared and headed toward him. It was traveling at high speed. He had barely time to step aside, when it whirled past with a machine-gun rattle of pebbles on fenders.

It was a sedan, black and ultra-streamlined. A new machine, powerful and fast. In front were two men, but they shot by so swiftly that Leander was able to catch only a blurred glimpse of their faces. He swung about and watched the sedan until it disappeared.

"Well!" Leander exclaimed. "Those gentlemen appear to be in a hurry." He moved on toward Hollis Harbor again and on his face was a thoughtful expression.

The car which had almost run him down had carried a New York license plate.

THE village of Hollis Harbor had a population of several hundred, dwelling in houses that were strung for a mile along the shore of the cove on which it was situated. It was rocky and hilly, its one important street lined for a short distance with frame or stone business buildings, the paint on the former weathered to a mellow hue by the salt air.

Several small craft lay at anchor; and made fast to the numerous wooden docks that jutted out from shore were still

others, with Cape Cod dories well represented.

There had been a time when Hollis Harbor had ranked high as a fishing port. But that was before the railroad had abandoned its spur line. Now it was deserted, sleepy, except in summer when the cottagers brought a burst of life to it, and a small group of artists set up their easels to catch its quaintness on canvas.

The men still fished. But the big schooners which worked the banks were no longer there. And the catches of the small boats were either salted and shipped out by truck, or carried direct to Portland by sea.

Leander, as he picked his way down the steep hill back of the village, darted his glance about curiously. "My word," he said softly. "It doesn't look as if anything ever happened here. Least of all anything violent, in such a peaceful scene."

In front of a store building, on the wide windows of which was a sign disclosing that it was the general merchandise establishment of J. Sanford, two men were sitting on a long wooden bench. The bench was brown and shiny, criss-crossed with knife marks where some whittler had idled away his time.

The men, too, looked as if they might have been whittled from some piece of well-seasoned wood, their faces seamed and wrinkled. Leander approached them with a slightly embarrassed cough.

"I—I beg your pardon," he murmured.

They looked at him with a curiously blank expression. One who seemed even older than his crony, shifted a can he was holding between his knobby knees, peered over the top of steel spectacles that rested near the tip of his nose. But neither spoke. Merely stared at the self-effacing little man before them.

"I beg your pardon," Leander re-

peated. "But could you tell me where Mr. Henry Condit lives?"

The silence continued, while the two ancients exchanged glances. Then the one with the cane worked his toothless gums a moment and said: "His house's the yellow one, down just this side the point. Quarter mile." His cane came up, pointed in the general direction of the North Star.

Leander made a little bow. He picked up his scuffed black bag and gave the two old fellows an apologetic smile. "Thank you," he said. "Sorry to bother you."

He started to walk away, but the man with the cane halted him. "Be you aiming to see Henry?" he asked.

"Why—yes."

Again the two antique specimens exchanged glances. Again the one chewed his toothless gums for a few seconds. "Well," he said slowly, "you're wastin' time."

Something in his tone sent one of Leander's eyebrows darting upward. "My word! I—I won't be able to see him?"

"Not likely—soon." The old fellow chuckled, and his companion echoed the sound.

"Why not?"

"Cause Henry Condit's dead!"

"Dead? Henry Condit dead?"

"Aye, sir! Deader'n a doorknob," the man with the cane cackled. "Buried him this morning."

"When did he die?" Leander asked.

"Yesterday morning. No, day 'fore yesterday 'twas. He was killed. Aye, sir, he was murdered, since you ask me!"

CHAPTER TWO

Grog-shop Clue

IT was a common practice of Jones and Jones for Leander to work on one angle of a case and Horatio on another. Not only did this method enable them to

move faster, but also it avoided what was apt to be a disadvantageous state of affairs: attracting attention.

The Jones brothers looked so much alike that when they appeared together, they invariably caused passersby to stare—and perhaps regret the last three drinks of the night before.

They had discovered another advantage in the divided method of operation. Not infrequently, the appearance of what seemed to be the same man at widely separated spots at the same time filled their foes with confusion. And this state of mind, Leander and Horatio were prompt to take advantage of.

So it was that about the time Leander was boarding the train for Boston, Horatio was driving across the Manhattan Bridge toward Brooklyn.

It had been a simple matter for Horatio to locate the seamen's home where Captain Ira Condit had spent the last ten years of his life. He had merely run through the death notices in the files of the *Times*.

The Anchorage, as it was called, was situated on the heights overlooking the Upper Bay and the Narrows, through which ships from the four corners of the globe sailed into New York Harbor.

Horatio parked his car at the curb in front. He walked the hundred feet to the entrance, his mild eyes missing no detail of the surroundings. The home was of brick and of considerable size, set in the center of a large plot of ground. On the south side of the building, he noticed two white-haired men in blue, brass-buttoned coats sitting in the sun. Old sailors, home from the sea for good.

He entered a spacious hallway, uncarpeted but spotlessly clean, as if it might have been holy-stoned only a short time before. On his right, he saw on the opaque glass panel of a half-open door the word: *Office*. A girl in a businesslike dress of

simple lines looked up as he walked in.

Horatio made a stiff little bow, gave her one of his half-embarrassed smiles. "If you please," he said, "I would like to speak to the gentleman in charge."

"Mr. Olcott," she replied, returning his smile. "I'll get him."

She rose from her chair at the desk and walked around until she was in front of Horatio. "What name, please?"

"Jones," Horatio murmured. "Just Jones."

"What is the nature of your business, Mr. Jones?"

The hesitation before Horatio replied was so slight that she didn't notice it. "I'm a lawyer. An attorney-at-law."

Once more she smiled in friendly fashion. "If you'll take a seat, I'll get Mr. Olcott."

SHE disappeared through the doorway with a swift stride. Horatio dropped into a chair against the wall. His blue eyes wandered about the office. Across from him on a shelf was a model of a full-rigged ship. The fidelity with which each detail of the rigging had been reproduced showed that its builder had known sailing craft by heart.

Above the door was a bronze ship's bell. Beneath it, a small sign, neatly lettered, offered the information that it was the bell of the brig *Excelsior*. There were half a dozen pictures of ships under sail, and a couple of steamships adorning the walls.

"My, my," Horatio murmured. "A truly nautical establishment."

He wondered about the Anchorage. He had, of course, heard about the Sailors' Snug Harbor, on Staten Island, where superannuated men of the sea were taken care of during their last years. But never of this place.

Footsteps coming down the hallway broke in upon his thoughts. The girl with

the smile entered, followed by a rotund, round-faced man.

He might have been forty, perhaps fifty. It was difficult to say off-hand. His hair was gray and thin on top, but his face was smooth and ruddy. From beneath slightly protruding brows, keen gray eyes surveyed Horatio questioninglly. Horatio stood up.

AT Olcott's suggestion they'd gone into his private office, just beyond the one in which Horatio had waited for him. The superintendent of the home sat at his desk, Horatio at one end of it.

"What was it you wanted to know about Captain Condit?" Olcott asked.

Horatio was apologetic. "I really hate to trouble you, I really do," he murmured. "But you see I represent some second cousins of the late captain. They live in Gloucester. Now, of course, my clients have no wish to lay claim to anything not rightly theirs. But in the family, there has always been—let us say, a legend that Captain Condit was possessed of considerable wealth."

Horatio was shooting in the dark. But he wanted to get Olcott to talk, answer questions, and he knew from experience that the meek manner and harmless appearance which he adopted invariably gave to his wildest falsehoods the semblance of truth.

It was so now. Olcott nodded his head slowly and pursed his lips. "I never heard Captain Condit mention any relatives other than his nephew Henry Condit, at Hollis Harbor," he said. "But that's understandable. He wasn't very communicative. Just the opposite. He was a man who lived to himself to a large extent."

"And about his wealth?" Horatio ventured. His glance as it came to rest on Olcott was one of timid interrogation.

The superintendent gave the question a moment's thought. "Well now," he said, "I don't know about that. When he died

he had a few hundred dollars on deposit with us here. We turned that over to his nephew when he came to take the body to Hollis Harbor for burial. And yet—" He broke off abruptly, fastened a squinting gaze on one corner of the ceiling.

"And yet?" Horatio murmured, after a moment's wait.

Olcott leaned forward with the palms of his hands pressing against the edge of the desk top. "Mr. Jones, I sometimes wondered about Captain Condit. Naturally, a good many of our guests are eccentric and crotchety, but he was even more peculiar than any of the others.

"You may not be aware of it, but the Anchorage is not a public institution, although we have an endowment of considerable size. The residents here pay for their keep. That is, they pay a large part of what it actually costs us."

"I understand," Horatio nodded.

"All our residents are retired ship's officers; most of them at one time or another were masters of their own vessels," Olcott continued. "Anyway, every summer Captain Condit would make a week's visit to his nephew in Hollis Harbor. Immediately on his return, he would pay us eighteen hundred dollars and deposit six or seven hundred dollars with us to withdraw as he chose."

Horatio looked mildly surprised. "Eighteen hundred dollars! It's—er—rather expensive living at the Anchorage."

"On the contrary," Olcott replied with a smile, "it's rather reasonable, considering the comforts we provide. The eighteen hundred dollars was a year's board for Captain Condit and Captain Mullet."

"Captain Mullet?"

"The only one of our guests with whom Captain Condit would associate to any extent—and with him he was on very intimate terms. Indeed, Mullet was with him at the time he had the stroke of

apoplexy from which he never recovered consciousness."

"And you think the fact that Captain Condit returned from his visit to Hollis Harbor each summer, and paid you for the two of them a relatively large amount, must indicate that he had some source of income?"

"Exactly!"

"Perhaps," Horatio suggested, "his nephew provided the money."

Olcott screwed up his face, shook his head. "From what his nephew let drop when he was here, I don't believe he's very well off. He inquired with Yankee thoroughness into the captain's affairs. I told him all I could—little enough."

Horatio was silent a moment, then he murmured: "It was most strange, his requesting that pennies be placed on his eyes when he was buried."

"Captain Condit was a strange man, Mr. Jones," Olcott replied solemnly.

"You saw them—the pennies?"

"No. His effects were in a large sea chest in his room. But after his death we touched nothing. We wired his nephew, as he had instructed us to do in case anything should happen to him. However, Mr. Henry Condit mentioned them to me in a conversation, while he was here. So I knew about them."

HORATIO was thoughtful. He was gradually making progress in getting the general background of Captain Condit. But he admitted to himself that he couldn't see any hint of a reason for the theft of the pennies off the dead captain's eyes.

"How long had Captain Condit been paying the expenses of Captain Mullet, Mr. Olcott?" he asked.

"Ever since they came here together. He also provided Mullet with pocket money." Olcott smiled and made a little gesture. "But it can be explained. Mullet,

from what I was told, was chief officer on Captain Condit's last command. They left the sea together. Had sailed together for many years."

"Possibly that's it," Horatio said slowly. "I'd like to speak with Captain Mullet, if I may."

Olcott lifted his shoulders. "Can't be done."

"Can't be done?" Horatio's pale eyes widened.

"Captain Mullet isn't living at the Anchorage any more."

Horatio rose slowly from his chair. He stood a moment in pensive silence. Olcott watched him, but said nothing. At last Horatio smiled helplessly. "Dear me," he said, almost as if to himself. "Where has he gone?"

"I don't know exactly."

"What?"

"Right after Captain Condit was stricken, Captain Mullet went out. When he came back, he had—well, he had been drinking pretty heavily."

"No doubt his old friend's death was a great shock to him," Horatio suggested.

Olcott agreed. "He evidently had been trying to drown his grief. He didn't stay here very long—just long enough to gather a few things from his room and tell us he was going away for a week or two. Of course, everyone who lives here can come and go as he pleases." Olcott shrugged. "It isn't a charity home."

"Didn't you—that is—didn't you ask him where he was going to be?" Horatio asked half apologetically.

"I did." Olcott made a wry face; then gave a short laugh. "He told me to go to hell. He was pretty drunk."

"Dear me!" Leander exclaimed. "Was he alone?"

"He came in alone. But I noticed he drove off with another man—a young man, I thought, though I wouldn't swear to it."

Olcott got up, paced across the room, and finally stopped before Horatio. "I tell you, Mr. Jones, I don't like it! It's been on my mind ever since he left. But what could I do! I couldn't make him stay here," he added wearily.

"No, I suppose not," Horatio murmured sympathetically. "He's probably off on a spree and will come back when he gets over it."

"Damn foolishness at his age—and dangerous!" Olcott snapped.

Horatio nodded agreement. "What kind of car did he drive away in?"

"A new one. One of those streamlined things that looks like a bottle-nosed whale. I noticed it, because it was the first of the kind I'd seen except in the ads."

There was a silence.

Olcott walked back and forth across the room, his hands clasp and unclasp behind his back.

Horatio blinked his pale eyes, as if completely bewildered. Behind those eyes, his brain was racing. There was something fishy in Mullet's spree. And what he had learned about Captain Condit satisfied him that Jones and Jones had played a live hunch on that newspaper clipping.

He put his hat on his head with meticulous care, coughed faintly. "Where do most of your guests go for their—a grog?" Horatio asked.

"Clancy's! Clancy's Grill and Grog Shop. The last part of the name attracts them, I suppose," Olcott said.

"If you don't mind—that is, possibly if I knew where it was I might visit it," Horatio murmured.

"It's down the street two blocks."

With a little bow Horatio stepped to the door. "Thank you. Both my clients and I thank you for your help, Mr. Olcott. I shall try Clancy's."

As he drove away, Horatio gave a little chuckle. He wondered whether the superintendent of the Anchorage would notice

that the automobile of the lawyer from Gloucester carried a New York license.

HORATIO found Clancy's without difficulty. A restaurant bar on a corner. Without locking his car, he crossed the sidewalk and pushed through the door into the "grog shop." The place differed but little from a thousand others in the city. Along one wall was a row of tables with checkered table cloths; opposite them was a long beer bar and a counter with stools. A stove and hot plate, coffee urn and steam table, enabled Clancy's to serve food and qualify as a restaurant.

Walking up to the bar, Horatio glanced casually about him. At the far end, two men were talking over glasses of beer. There was only one other customer in the establishment. At the table nearest the door, a man with a white beard, tobacco-stained, was grasping a whisky glass. He was wearing a dark blue coat, of reefer cut and with brass buttons; on the back of the large corded hand, which surrounded the glass, was tattooed a mermaid.

Horatio smiled to himself. Olcott had given him the right information when he had said that this was the hang-out of the residents of the Anchorage.

As the bartender approached, swishing a damp rag in figure eights over the mahogany, Horatio looked at him and said meekly: "A beer, please."

There was something vaguely familiar about the bartender Horatio decided, as the man in the white apron pushed a seidel beneath a tap and watched the amber fluid flood it through narrowed eyes. He was a man of not more than five feet six, but well built, with a broken nose and a bumpy forehead. An expugilist beyond a doubt.

By the time the seidel had been placed on the bar and the bartender had turned

to ring up the dime in the register, Horatio had placed him.

It was Clancy himself. Mike the Mauler Clancy, twenty years ago a good second-rate welterweight. Five years later, a resident of Sing Sing on a larceny charge. After that—Horatio frowned faintly, but almost immediately his face cleared. He had it now!

Mike Clancy had been one of Fox Fogarty's gang of rum-runners. Fogarty's chief lieutenant, if Horatio remembered correctly. Must have decided to open up a legal place after Repeal. That explained to some extent the popularity of the grill with the old sea dogs at the Anchorage. Clancy could get good stuff, and Horatio felt certain that no more than a small percentage of the liquor that crossed the bar was tax-paid.

Having served his meek-looking customer in the gray suit, Clancy paid no more attention to him. He strolled down the bar to where the two men were talking.

Picking up his glass, Horatio looked about him hesitantly. Then he walked to the table where the man with the white beard was sitting. He smiled in a friendly way.

"I—I beg your pardon," he apologized. "Would you mind if I sit down here? I don't like to drink by myself."

The old fellow looked up, squinted his watery eyes. He stared at Horatio a moment, after which he blinked rapidly for a second or two. "Sit down!" he suddenly boomed. "Aye, sir, sit down! Man's got to have company with his grog." His voice cracked a bit, but it had a heavy quality reminiscent of commands bellowed above the howling of the gale.

Horatio pulled out a chair. He noticed that the old boy with the white beard was about three sheets in the wind.

"My name's Jones," Horatio said. "Just Jones."

"Captain Duff. At your service, sir."

"Here's health, Captain!" Horatio lifted his seidel.

"Down the hatch!" the captain boomed. His hand jerked up, the contents went down.

Catching Clancy's eyes, Horatio beckoned to him. He came around the end of the bar and stood by the table.

"What'll it be?" Horatio asked.

The captain hiccuped, wiped his stained whiskers with the tattooed mermaid. "Cuban rum! My drink's rum, sir!"

Clancy nodded and returned behind the bar. But as he poured a shot of rum from a bottle, he glanced covertly at the two oddly assorted figures. More especially, he let his mean thin eyes study the mild-appearing Horatio.

HORATIO and the captain drank. They drank another, and another. All the while, Horatio was aware that Mike the Mauler Clancy was surreptitiously watching them. Horatio had placed Clancy; he was beginning to wonder whether Clancy knew who he was. It didn't seem likely. Jones and Jones had never tangled with the broken-nosed ex-convict.

Conscious that the bartender's cauliflowered ears were straining to catch their conversation, Horatio kept it general. The old captain was mellow, to put it mildly, and his talk tumbled out with slight encouragement. It was largely of the old days, talk of the sea and strange ports, talk seasoned with salty oaths.

Finally, Horatio saw Clancy come from behind the bar, walk to the back of the room and enter a telephone booth. He turned to the bearded Captain Duff.

"I suppose you live at the Anchorage, Captain," he said.

"Aye, aye, sir! Been there since she was launched—twenty year ago come spring."

"You knew Captain Condit then."

A blistering oath rumbled through the captain's whiskers. He almost choked, then suddenly found his voice. "I knew him! Aye, the low-down—" He ended in another burst of profanity.

"Dear me!" Horatio exclaimed. "I'm sorry I mentioned it."

Captain Duff gulped the remainder of his drink. He waited until its warmth had percolated through his system. Then he squared his shoulders, brushed the mermaid across his mouth.

"No," he said more quietly. "A man shouldn't speak evil of the dead. Captain Condit's gone—God rest his dirty soul! But I won't be the one to say a word against him."

"Quite right," Horatio agreed.

"But I'll say this much," Captain Duff continued. "I knew him for fifty years, man and boy. He once sailed as second with me back in the Eighties. But I never met a man who changed like he did after he quit the sea."

Horatio lifted his brows. "Changed? In what way?"

"He used to be companionable in the old days. But from the minute he got to the Anchorage, he wouldn't have nothing to do with anyone. Not even his old shipmates. Kept to himself—seemed to have his blasted soul full of bilge water. Wouldn't talk to anyone. Except Mullet, and he'd spend hours with him."

"You know Mullet pretty well then?"

"Aye, I know him. He was chief officer for Condit on his last cruise. A good man, Mullet."

"That's odd," Horatio said brightly. "I was just over at the Anchorage to see Captain Mullet."

"Mister Mullet!" Duff growled. "He had his master's papers, but he never had a ship. Chief was the best he ever signed on for, even though he did call himself 'Captain.'"

"Excuse me," Horatio said humbly.

"If you're looking for Mullet, you won't find him at the Anchorage," Duff said, screwing one eye up knowingly.

"So I discovered."

"He's gone."

"Yes."

The captain leaned over the table at some risk to his balance and, lowering his voice, said huskily: "He ain't coming back."

Horatio looked distressed. "Dear me. Are you sure?"

"I was sitting here when he decided to leave. I was drinking rum with him and the young fellow who talked him into going. The young fellow bought the rum."

There was a sparkle in Horatio's pale blue eyes, but his voice was calm. "I have some good news for Mr. Mullet," he said. "I'm anxious to find him. Do you know where he is now?"

"Aye—I know where Mullet is." The old captain ran his bony fingers down the length of his beard. "Mullet was afraid he might be making a mistake, so he told me."

"And where can I locate him?" Horatio asked.

Before his question could be answered, he was seized roughly by the shoulders, jerked to his feet and whirled about. Mike the Mauler Clancy, his eyes compressed into menacing slits, his chin jutted out, snarled at him: "I get you now!"

CLANCY released his hold on Horatio, who shrugged his disarranged coat into place. A funny little smile fluttered at the corners of his mouth, but there was a dangerous glint in his pale eyes.

In a battle of fists with the Marquis of Queensbury rules prevailing, Mike the Mauler would have had little difficulty in handling the meek-appearing man he had so abruptly yanked from his chair. But what Mike Clancy did not know was that

in a rough and tumble, Horatio Jones was master of more tricks of jiu-jitsu than the ordinary Japanese wrestler.

But Horatio was not belligerent. "Dear me," he said with an aggrieved air, "is this the way you treat all your customers?"

Clancy sneered. "Customers? Listen, mugg, I'm onto you. I been thinkin' for some time that I knew you. But I made a couple of phone calls—got your description—just to be sure. I'm onto you like a roof now. You're Jones!"

"Yes, that's my name," Horatio murmured. His smile had turned slightly grim. He was trying to be pacific, but he was watching every muscle twitch of Clancy's face. "I'm Jones. A common name. Just Jones."

Clancy's jaw moved forward another inch. "Well, Jones—you just get the hell out of here! No dicks are welcome in Clancy's grill. And besides"—his tone became even more menacing—"I know why you're here. Lay off! I'm warnin' you! Now get out!"

Captain Duff had been watching the unexpected turn of affairs with slightly muddled astonishment. Now he hoisted himself to his feet, reached out a long thin arm and shook his fist under Clancy's nose. His watery eyes were blinking rapidly.

"See here, Clancy, you wharf rat!" he began, and would have continued, but Horatio interrupted.

"I shall be delighted to leave, Mr. Clancy," he said quietly. "My friend, Captain Duff, and I will adjourn to another and more congenial establishment."

"Like hell!" Clancy took a step forward, put himself between Horatio and the old captain. "Duff stays here—and if you ever show your face around here again, you get the works!"

"Dear me," Horatio grinned. "I'm

obliged to disagree with you. Captain Duff and I depart together."

Clancy ripped out an oath. His left fist shot forward, a fist that had laid many a ham-and-egger on the resin. But it didn't land. Horatio wasn't there. A chair whipped through the air, landed with a crash on Clancy's skull. With a startled grunt, the ex-convict collapsed in a heap.

"Come!" Horatio exclaimed. He seized Duff by the arm, started for the door.

THE two who had been standing at the end of the bar edged forward. Now one of them slid his hand beneath his coat. But before it came out again, he found himself staring into the business end of an automatic, the operating end of which was clasped in Horatio's hand.

"Not too fast!" Horatio said dryly. "We depart in peace—not pieces."

He pushed Captain Duff through the door, then backed out himself. His gun was close to his side, barely noticeable, but ready for use. Clancy on the floor gave a groan.

"Call off your dogs, Clancy," Horatio said. "They're no good."

The door slammed. Horatio half led and half dragged the befuddled old sea captain to the car. He opened the door, climbed in, pulled Duff after him and into the seat. Then he shut the door and stepped on the starter.

And all the time, he had kept a sharp eye on the entrance to Clancy's.

The engine caught with a roar. Horatio laid his gun on the seat beside him. He let in the clutch and the car lurched from the curb. By this time, Clancy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him were his two gunmen. He waved his arm, and one of them brought his hand up a few inches.

Once—twice—three times he fired!

A tinkle of glass. Horatio, glancing for a second from the street ahead, saw Captain Duff sliding slowly down in the

seat. The old man's eyes were closed, blood was welling from the side of his head. It moved in a hideous stream down his face and then began to glide down his neck.

CHAPTER THREE

The Corpse at Captain's Rock

THE news that Henry Condit, Captain Condit's nephew, had been killed—murdered, as the old man on the bench described it—came as an unexpected shock to Leander. But it fully justified the suspicions of Jones and Jones that there was something ominous behind the theft of the two pennies off the dead man's eyes.

The two old fellows stared at Leander, their leathery faces compressed into myriads of wrinkles, their dim eyes squinting. They seemed pleased with themselves; like a couple of old women who had just been able to disgorge a juicy and startling piece of gossip.

"My word," Leander said thoughtfully. "Murdered. Henry Condit murdered."

"They found his body in the woods back of the house," the man with the cane volunteered. "His wife found it. He didn't come in to supper after they'd put old Ira in the ground."

"You mean after Captain Condit's funeral?"

"Aye, that's Ira I'm talking about. He died down to the city. New York City."

Leander nodded. "And have they—that is, has the murderer been caught."

"Caught?" The ancient cackled disdainfully. "Course, he ain't been caught. Who'd catch him?" he demanded, and without waiting for an answer, continued: "There was a couple of state policemen come over. They stayed around a day or two—left this morning. But they didn't do nothing. Guess they give it up. It's an outrage! Aye, it's an outrage!"

"How was he killed?" Leander asked.

"Shot! Shot in the back!"

Leander looked properly horrified. "My word! And I was very anxious to talk with Henry Condit. Now he's dead." He could tell by the expression on the faces of the old men that they would like to know what he had wanted to talk to Henry Condit about. He smiled to himself. "I wanted to sell him some life insurance," Leander murmured.

"Too bad you didn't come a week ago," the second old man said, with a jerk of his head. "His widder and little girl could use some money."

"She's still here, his widow?"

"Where else'd she be? She ain't got no place else to go."

For a moment, Leander was silent. Then he picked up his grip again and smiled at the two graybeards. "Well, I'm much obliged to you. You say Henry Condit lived in that yellow house?"

"That's it. Just this side the point," the man with the cane nodded.

Leander moved away. When he had gone only a dozen paces, the old fellow suddenly called after him. "You're wastin' your time. Henry Condit's widder ain't got any money for such foolishness as life insurance."

Down the street a short distance, Leander saw a lunchroom. He entered, left his grip with the proprietor and then continued on his way to the yellow house.

It was getting along in the afternoon. On the eastern slopes of the rocky hills, the shadows were already beginning to blur the pines. Off the entrance to the cove, several small boats were heading toward home, the pop-pop of their engines floating faintly over the calm waters.

MRS. HENRY CONDIT came to the door at his first knock. She was a woman of middle age, thin, tired-looking, with streaked gray hair drawn into a bun at the back of her neck. She stared at

Leander almost with indifference. Close behind her, Leander saw a child about six, in a faded gingham dress.

He came directly to the point, once he had learned that she was the widow of the slain nephew of Captain Ira Condit, and so far as he knew the only surviving member of the family. His manner was no longer self-effacing. It was crisp, efficient, the sort to inspire confidence.

"Mrs. Condit," he said, a reassuring smile in his pale eyes, "I am a detective—from New York."

"A—a detective!" She looked frightened; her skinny hands plucked at her faded apron.

"You have nothing to worry about," he said kindly. "I'm here to help you."

"I ain't worried. Just surprised."

"I'll explain," he said.

"Perhaps you'd better come in and set down," Mrs. Condit suggested.

IN THE little parlor with its horsehair-stuffed furniture, Leander selected a chair that appeared to be somewhat less uncomfortable than the others. Henry Condit's widow perched on the edge of a sofa across from him. Her hands, clasped beneath her apron, worked nervously. Her little girl, saucer-eyed, sat beside her holding tightly to her mother's arm.

"The police in New York are investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of Captain Ira Condit," Leander said slowly. "That's why I came up here. And only a few minutes ago, I learned that your husband had been killed."

She nodded dully. "Poor Henry," she mumbled.

"Have you, yourself, any idea who might have shot him?" Leander asked gently. "Did he have any enemies; was there anyone in Hollis Harbor, with whom he had quarreled?"

"Not Henry. He didn't have any enemies. That's why I can't understand it,"

she replied, her voice choking. She raised one corner of her apron and dabbed at her eyes.

Leander waited until she had composed herself. Then he asked: "Mrs. Condit, do you know why your husband went into the woods that day?"

"No."

"But when he didn't come back for supper, you went to look for him?"

"Yes. I had a feeling something'd happened. I found him up near Captain's Rock. It was almost dark, but I just seemed to know where he was, somehow. I went straight there. Henry was lying on the ground, face down. He was dead," she added.

"Captain's Rock?" Leander looked at her questioningly.

Mrs. Condit smiled wanly. "That's just a name Henry and me give to it—a big rock where a body can sit and look out past the point and out to sea."

"Why did you call it that?"

"Because every summer when Uncle Ira'd come to see us, he used to go up there and sit for hours. That's why we got to calling it Captain's Rock."

"Henry'd sort of thought Uncle Ira'd leave us a lot of money when he died," Mrs. Condit murmured. "But there wasn't anything. Only a few hundred dollars that they turned over to Henry at the place where Uncle Ira lived in New York. That hardly paid for the funeral."

Leander slowly stroked his chin. Finally, he asked: "Why did you think Captain Condit had any considerable amount of money to leave?"

She didn't answer at once. The question seemed to have taken her by surprise. "Well," she said at last, "that was Henry's idea. I didn't think much about it. Uncle Ira, now that you mention it, always seemed to have money, and I suppose that give Henry his notion. When he got back to New York after visiting us, he'd

send Henry a hundred dollars every year. It helped us out a lot," she added.

"About the pennies that were placed on Captain Condit's eyes, the pennies that were stolen," Leander said. "What do you know about them?"

MRS. CONDIT suddenly began to tremble. Her tired eyes widened; beneath her apron, her hands twitched, making the cloth jump up and down. When she spoke, her breath came in panicky gasps. "You—you know—about—about them?"

"Yes," he nodded. "From the newspapers."

She put her fingers over her lips, stared at him. "Mr.—Mr.—"

"Jones," Leander smiled. "Just Jones."

"Mr. Jones, I didn't want Henry to do it. I didn't want him to put those two pennies on Uncle Ira's eyes, even if he did say to do it in his will!" She had suddenly become intense, vehement. "It wasn't according to Scripture. There's nothing in the Bible about putting pennies on the eyes of dead folk."

"No, Mrs. Condit, I don't believe there's anything about it in the Bible," Leander agreed. He was beginning to understand this withered female better. "But I didn't know that Captain Condit was particularly religious."

Her eyes flashed. "He was a heathen! A heathen!" she repeated bitterly. "He never got religion!"

"Too bad," Leander murmured sympathetically. "But why do you suppose anyone would want to steal them?"

"Mr. Jones," she said, leaning forward and fixing him with her gaze, "it was the devil who stole them! He came in during the night through the kitchen door. I found it unlocked."

A funny expression flitted over Leander's face. This woman was slightly mad. He could see that now. And he wondered

if it might not have something to do with the murder of Henry Condit. But he said: "Why do you suppose Captain Condit wanted to be buried with the pennies over his eyes?"

A sly look appeared in her weary eyes. "Henry said it was because one of them had a lock of Aunt Ella's hair in it."

"What?"

"Uncle Ira's wife. She died more than thirty years ago. Them two pennies was kind of lockets. Henry said Uncle Ira showed him inside of them once when he was a boy, and there was a little lock of hair in it. Uncle Ira always carried them around with him when he was alive."

"My word," Leander murmured, almost to himself. "Lockets!" He half closed his eyes in thought.

"That's what Henry said. But I don't think he knew what he was talking about."

"Why not?"

"Because Henry tried to get them open, and he couldn't. He told me he tried, before he put them on Uncle Ira's eyelids. But he said it didn't make no difference, cause they only had some of Aunt Ella's hair in them anyways."

"You—you saw them?" Leander asked.

"Of course," she nodded. "They were big pennies, bigger than quarters. Not like the pennies we have. Henry said they'd come from India."

She stopped, and fastened her tired eyes on Leander. Leander, however, appeared to be unaware of her scrutiny. He bobbed his head up and down a couple of times in an absent-minded manner, then lapsed into introspection. There was a long moment of silence.

He was thinking about those big pennies—pennies off a dead man's eyes. Pennies that had been fashioned by some skilled craftsman of the mysterious East into delicate lockets. And in those lockets, Captain Condit had carried around bits

of the hair of his wife, dead these many years.

A slow, knowing smile crossed Leander's face. He stood up. "Mrs. Condit," he said, "you have, of course, gone through the late captain's effects."

She shook her head dubiously. "Well—no, I haven't. Henry did in a way, although he didn't read none of the letters nor anything like that. Was going to do that later."

Leander's manner became crisp, authoritative. "Very well! You and I'll do that now!"

MRS. CONDIT hesitated. A glance at Leander, no longer meek and self-effacing, but quietly confident, efficient, seemed to reassure her. She rose from the horsehair sofa with a little sigh and, turning toward the door, beckoned to him to follow her. The little girl tagged along behind.

The captain's sea chest was in the spare bedroom up under the eaves. It was a big chest, battered, scarred, bound with brass; the marks of countless voyages had been dented into it. Mrs. Condit handed Leander a key and he turned the heavy old-fashioned lock.

For fifteen minutes Leander occupied himself with the contents of the chest—articles of clothing, an old sextant, pocket chronometer, a package containing the captain's papers as mate and master, yellow with age, a bundle of letters, and numerous other articles. He went over them all hurriedly. But when he finally closed the lid of the chest and got to his feet, there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

In his hand was an envelope. It was a new envelope, an envelope that bore the return address of the Anchorage on the flap. And inside were two small circlets of golden hair.

As Leander had half suspected, Captain Condit had removed the locks of his

wife's hair from the two pennies. In their place, he had put—what? Leander gazed thoughtfully at the envelope he was holding, as if trying to find the answer there. Then, suddenly, he turned to Mrs. Condit.

"Where is this Captain's Rock you spoke about?" he asked.

She made a little motion with her hand. "Up there. Up the hill in back of the house. There's a path leads to it."

Following the directions Mrs. Condit gave him, Leander started from the yellow house back into the woods. It was getting late; the sun was almost below the horizon and beneath the pines the shadows were thick and ominous.

As he picked his way up the rocky path, Leander wondered about Horatio. What had his brother learned at the seamen's home where Captain Condit had died? Had he discovered, as Leander had surmised, that the old captain possessed a fortune?

Leander frowned. From what Mrs. Condit had just said, Captain Condit had left almost nothing. And yet her husband had believed his uncle possessed of considerable wealth. Two questions bothered Leander particularly: Had Captain Condit's death been natural? Why had Henry Condit been murdered?

The first question, he decided, would probably have to be answered by Horatio. The second, he might be able to answer himself.

Mrs. Condit had said the rock was a quarter of a mile from the house. To Leander, it seemed more like a half mile before the path at last emerged from beneath the trees into a little clearing on the side of the hill. It was a natural clearing, the surface of the ground consisting of an expanse of rock that offered but little chance for shrubs or trees to take root.

In the center, he saw what he knew must be the captain's rock. It was really

three large rocks, with many smaller ones about them. The middle one of the group rose probably twenty-five feet, bald and rugged.

After a little investigation, Leander discovered how he could make his way to the top, climbing from one to another of the rocks. It was a relatively easy ascent. He looked about. It was as Mrs. Condit had said. From Captain's Rock, one could see through the entrance to the cove and far out to sea. Nearer, the straggling houses of Hollis Harbor met the eye.

"A regular lookout," Leander murmured to himself.

He regarded the prospect before him in silent thought for some time. Why had Captain Condit always spent so much time up here on the occasion of his visits? The view of the sea no doubt attracted him, Leander decided. Yet was that the only reason? Or even the main reason?

He had hoped to be able to study this vicinity carefully. But he saw that it was too dark now. He'd have to let it go until tomorrow. Before starting to descend, he walked to the back of the rock and looked about on the uphill side.

As his glance finally dropped to the ground directly below, he gave a startled gasp.

In the shadows, he was able to distinguish the outline of a human figure. He dropped to his knees and peered down. He could see that it was a man, lying on his face, with one leg drawn up and both arms spread wide.

At a speed that endangered his safety, Leander scrambled down from the rock, dashed around in back. He bent over the still form, turned it so that he could see the face. Then from his pocket he took his flashlight.

He was looking into the face of an old man, a face deeply wrinkled and smooth-

shaven. A fringe of hair around the head was snow-white.

A quick examination disclosed that he had been stabbed directly between the shoulder blades—a deep, ugly wound, from which the blood had welled out and spread in a pool upon the ground. The weapon had been withdrawn and a hasty glance about failed to discover it.

When Leander stood up, he was satisfied on one point. This man had been dead not more than two hours. Perhaps not more than one.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Seven Seas Shop

THE small man with the neatly clipped mustache rolled down his shirt sleeves and began to put on his coat. He let his glance rest for a moment on the bed, on the still form lying there beneath the sheets. Then he turned to Horatio with a hint of a smile.

"Of course," he said slowly, "anything of this kind is apt to have a bad reaction with a man of his age. But your friend the captain seems to be a— pretty tough old customer."

Horatio nodded. "He is," he said dryly. "And you think, Doctor, he'll pull through all right?"

"Don't think there's much doubt about it."

"The wound?"

"A mere scratch. It was liquor that put him out, although I dare say being hit was the necessary touch."

"In other words," Horatio smiled, "Captain Duff was passed out rather than knocked out."

"Precisely. He'll probably sleep for seven or eight hours and wake up with a big head and a bad disposition." He picked up his hat and bag, started toward the door. Horatio accompanied him.

"If he takes a turn for the worse," the

doctor continued, "just call me. Otherwise, I'll drop in tomorrow morning."

Returning to the bedroom, Horatio sat down on a chair beside the bed containing the white-bearded figure of Captain Duff. The old fellow's watery eyes were closed, but there was a gap in the expanse of whiskers through which came irregular gurgling snores. On the side of his head was a patch of surgical gauze held in place by adhesive tape, where the doctor had dressed his slight injury.

When he had fled from Clancy's with old Duff crumpled down in the seat beside him, Horatio was at first undecided what to do. He could take his unconscious passenger back to the Anchorage. Or he could take him to a hospital. In case he were badly injured, the latter course was to be preferred.

But this ancient mariner held the secret of where Mullet could be found. So Horatio had driven into a quiet back street, examined the wound on the side of Duff's head. Convinced that it was not serious, he had driven directly to the apartment on Central Park South, where he and Leander lived.

With the aid of the doorman, Duff had been carried upstairs. Horatio had summoned a doctor. And now he had on his hands one completely inebriated old sea captain, but one who held a secret that Horatio meant to learn as soon as his guest revived sufficiently to talk.

From his pocket, Horatio took one of the thin black stogies, to which both the Jones brothers were addicted. He touched a match to it, blew a few thoughtful puffs toward the ceiling.

Had there been anything back of Clancy's refusal to let him take Duff along, beyond his natural objection to having a customer lured away? It seemed to Horatio that Clancy's attitude had been too belligerent to be entirely explained by his dislike for detectives. He had been trying

to frighten him off, Horatio concluded.

Why had Mullet left the Anchorage? Who was the young man with whom he left? What was the connection between his leaving and Condit's death? Did Condit have a fortune hidden somewhere? Did Mullet know where it was? And what had the theft of the pennies to do with it all?

A sudden frown darkened Horatio's usually pleasant brow. He held his stogy poised halfway to his mouth. His eyes seemed to be gazing off into space.

Had Captain Condit died from natural causes—or had he been put out of the way by some clever and undetected means?

As he sat there beside the unconscious Duff, Horatio let these and a dozen other questions race about in his mind. He studied the situation from all angles; he developed theories, only to discard them. Until at last, with a shake of his head, he decided to let the whole thing rest till he found Mullet and talked with him.

IT was almost midnight before Captain Duff began to show any real signs of coming to. In the interim, Horatio had sent for a trained nurse. She stood beside him now, ruddy-faced and efficient-looking in her crisp uniform.

With a cough and a groan, Captain Duff suddenly sat bolt upright in bed. He blinked his watery eyes, worked his lips, wrinkled his nose. Then he looked around him dazedly and presently let out a half dozen salty curses.

"By God!" he spluttered. "By God, I can't get my bearings! Where am I?"

Carefully Horatio explained. And little by little Captain Duff began to understand what had happened. He shook his shaggy head.

"Well, I'd better hoist my anchor and set sail!"

He started to get out of bed, but Horatio put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"No hurry, Captain. Better stay here tonight. You'll be all snug, and you must remember you were wounded," Horatio murmured soothingly. "Besides Miss Berring has come in to look after you."

"How's that?"

"This is Miss Berring, Captain."

Slowly, Duff turned his head till his gaze fell full upon the ruddy-faced trained nurse. He brought up a gnarled hand and ran it down the length of his beard. Then he wiped his mouth with the tattooed mermaid.

"Ho! A lady standing watch tonight!" he roared, and gave a loud laugh. But he settled back on the pillow with a grunt and a sigh. "Rum!" he muttered. "Rum."

Miss Berring looked at Horatio, who nodded and indicated a very small portion. She left the room and Horatio began to talk to the old captain. With very little effort, he extracted the information for which he had been waiting so long. And it was with a feeling of chagrin that he found it had been available all the time—written on a sheet of paper in Captain Duff's jacket.

With a faintly puzzled air, Horatio read the address. He couldn't quite understand it. He had expected a hotel or an apartment. "Dear me," he muttered to himself. "I suppose I'd better look into this at once."

He called Miss Berring aside, explained to her that he was going out and didn't know exactly when he would be back. Then, providing her with funds, he gave instructions that the old captain was to be kept in bed until he had fully recovered, which certainly wouldn't be for twenty-four hours. After that Horatio left the apartment.

On the way downtown in his taxi, he took out his automatic, made sure it was ready for instant use. Satisfied, he slipped it back in his pocket and gave it a pat. Then he settled down in his seat and idly

watched the lights of Fifth Avenue slide by.

They drove south to Twenty-third, where the driver took Broadway to Union Square. At Union Square he cut over to Fourth Avenue and presently they were speeding south on Lafayette. But only for a short distance; then he headed directly into the heart of the lower East Side.

A half dozen blocks from his destination, Horatio leaned over and tapped on the window separating him from the driver.

"You can let me out here!"

IT was after one o'clock, but the streets were far from deserted. As Horatio made his way south on Second Avenue, he passed numerous pedestrians. Automobiles and trucks drove by at frequent intervals. Overhead the deafening rumble of the elevated came regularly.

He found the number for which he was looking. It was over a door which was protected by a heavy iron grille. Beside the door extended a wide show window, so covered with dust and grime as almost to conceal the many dozen objects on display.

Horatio glanced up, read the sign formed of faded gilt letters—*Seven Seas Curio Shop*.

As he walked past, he tried to look inside, but he was unable to make out anything in the gloomy interior. Several doors farther along a delicatessen was still open, and beyond that on the corner was a beer bar. But aside from these two, none of the shops or other establishments in the block was doing business.

At the corner, Horatio crossed the street and retraced his course till he had reached a point directly opposite the curio shop. There he found a convenient dark doorway and, slipping into it, studied the place with the grilled door.

He could understand better now why Mullet had given this as his address. He had seen shops of this type before, and he knew that in the old days the proprietors were apt to depend for their stock to some extent upon the sailors, who brought strange objects from far ports and smuggled them in.

Probably at some time or other Mullet had done business with the owner of the Seven Seas Curio Shop. It was near the East River Docks, and there were wretched tenements above some of the stores, showing lighted windows. But the windows above the curio shop were dark and forbidding. This fact ended a momentary plan to cross the street and see if he could locate a night bell. That would hardly be wise policy anyway, Horatio told himself.

While he was debating what to do, Horatio saw an automobile slide up to the curb opposite him and directly before the Seven Seas Curio Shop. It was a sedan, new and ultra streamlined. Only one man was in it, and after coming to a halt he remained in his seat behind the wheel.

For a few minutes Horatio stood motionless, watching. The man in the car lit a cigarette, tossed the match out the open window of the sedan. But he kept his place, and Horatio knew he was waiting for someone.

Cautiously, almost like a gray shadow, Horatio emerged from the doorway and moved down the street. When he reached a point from which he could obtain a clear view of the doorway to the curio shop, he halted. Taking up a position in the protection of an elevated pillar, he kept his eyes fixed on the car.

Five minutes—ten minutes passed. Then a light flickered behind the dusty show window. He could see figures moving around inside. Horatio pressed closer to the pillar. A couple of pedestrians

walked by, but they paid little heed to him, assuming that he was drunk and clinging to the pillar for support.

A little later the door of the shop opened. A slightly stooped figure came out, crossed the sidewalk and got into the sedan. Horatio could see still other figures in the doorway. They seemed to be talking earnestly.

But presently one of them separated and started toward the car. Halfway across the walk he stopped and held his watch up so that the light from the street lamp would fall upon it. Then he entered the sedan. But not before Horatio had a chance to see the man's face—it was Mike the Mauler Clancy!

The door of the car and the door of the shop slammed almost simultaneously. With an exhaust that was scarcely more than a powerful whisper, the black sedan glided up Second Avenue.

Horatio stepped from behind the elevated pillar and watched a slinking figure emerge from the shadows and glide down the street. In the feeble light he could see the yellow skin and slanting eyes of a Chinaman or other Oriental.

A tiny frown appeared between Horatio's mild blue eyes. He had a feeling that this other man also had been watching the Seven Seas Curio Shop; that he also was interested in the three men who had just driven away in the black sedan.

CAPTAIN DUFF wasn't feeling very well the next morning and Horatio had little difficulty in persuading him to remain at the apartment and keep to his bed. Leaving instructions with Miss Berring to do whatever was possible for the old fellow's comfort, he took his departure.

He was satisfied in his own mind that the stooped man who had left the curio shop the previous night with Mike the Mauler Clancy had been Mullet. The

driver of the ultra-streamlined sedan, he surmised, was the young man with whom Mullet had left the Anchorage. But what was the object of this odd alliance? Was Mullet a willing, or an unwilling member?

He thought about those things as he drove downtown in his car. He thought, too, about Leander. Leander wouldn't reach Hollis Harbor until sometime during the afternoon. He couldn't very well pick up any clue to a hidden crime before then. Horatio smiled to himself. He certainly had a head start on Leander in that respect!

The Seven Seas Curio Shop looked different by daylight. It had lost some of its air of gloomy mystery; but its shabbiness was intensified. There was still something vaguely ominous, sinister, about the place, however.

Pushing open the door with the iron grille on it, Horatio entered. He found himself in a long low room, filled to overflowing with furniture, brassware, odd chests, statues, huge vases, ship models—a conglomeration of objects old and new.

Dust lay everywhere. The dim air itself was laden with it; one could have traced his name on any of the articles in the stock. There was no light, except what came through the front window, and for a moment Horatio was unable to tell whether there was anyone in the shop.

By the time his eyes had become accustomed to the change from the brightness of outdoors, a black curtain hanging in a doorway at the back had been pushed aside. Horatio saw a man enter and hobble slowly and painfully toward him.

He was a small man. His hunched shoulders and the way his head stuck forward from his body, like a turtle, added to the impression of shortness. His nose was long; his mouth was wide with a thick lower lip that hung out loosely. A scraggly beard covered the lower half of his face and above his huge ears was

perched a little, brown, skull cap.

He approached Horatio, peered at him through old-fashioned, gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Well?"

Horatio gave an embarrassed cough. "I beg your pardon," he murmured, "but I'm looking for someone."

"*Ja!* You are looking for someone? Here?" The shrewd, deep-set eyes were studying Horatio.

"Exactly!" Horatio nodded. "A Captain Mullet. Do you happen to know him?"

It seemed to Horatio that the man in the skull cap stiffened. He cocked his head on one side, tugged at his scraggly beard, looked at Horatio out of the corners of his half-closed eyes. Finally, however, he began to move his head slowly up and down.

"I know him, *ja*. He isn't here now."

"Do you know when he will be here?"

The little man considered. A crafty expression flickered for an instant in his deep-set eyes, then was gone. When he spoke, his voice was husky but ingratiating. "Captain Mullet has gone to the country. He will be back tonight. Late."

"What time?"

"Well—" The man in the skull cap hesitated. "I tell you. You come here at midnight, and Captain Mullet will be here."

HORATIO looked at his watch. It was only a little after eleven. "You feel pretty sure Captain Mullet will be here at midnight?"

"Positive!"

"Thank you," Horatio murmured half apologetically. "Thank you very much."

The man in the skull cap rubbed his thin hands briskly together. "You will be back then—yes?" he asked with a hint of eagerness.

Horatio looked at him with a funny

sort of smile. "Dear me," he murmured, "I wouldn't be at all surprised if I came back here tonight."

"That's good! Good!"

The owner of the shop followed Horatio to the door, held it open for him. He stood there in the doorway with his arms folded on his chest, a sly cruel expression only partially hidden by his beard, as Horatio climbed into his car.

Horatio had hesitated a long time before going into the shop and inquiring about Mullet; he doubted seriously that it would be a wise move, after having seen Mike the Mauler Clancy come out of the place. Then he had decided that because Clancy knew him, it did not necessarily follow that the proprietor of the shop did.

Now, as he caught a glimpse of the hunched figure in his rear-view mirror, he realized that the shop keeper had spotted him. Clancy no doubt had warned him to be on the look-out.

"Dear me," Horatio murmured, as he slipped the car in gear. "Won't you come into my parlor said the spider to the fly?" He chuckled.

He decided that the bearded little proprietor did resemble a scrawny black spider. "But Horatio Jones isn't a fly," he added to himself. It was a neat man-trap the owner of the Seven Seas Shop wanted to spring at midnight. An hour when one could get away with almost anything—even murder—in this neighborhood.

Well, he'd be back. But he wouldn't walk into any traps. In fact, Horatio concluded, the little man in the skull cap wouldn't even be aware that he'd come back, if Horatio could help it. And he thought he could.

So far, he had brought to light no crime, unless he wished to consider the attack on Duff and himself by Clancy's gunmen. But for reasons of his own, Horatio didn't care to take further no-

tice of that, since Duff was only slightly injured and he himself unscathed.

On the other hand, he was convinced beyond all doubt that there was something afoot—some sinister plot. If Mike Clancy was in it, he knew it was murderous. And having met the proprietor of the Seven Seas Curio Shop, he was satisfied that the scheme was crafty and for high stakes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gems of Jeopardy

AT five minutes to midnight the bearded little man was standing in the doorway of his curio shop. Behind him, the place was dimly illumined by a single electric bulb, hanging from the ceiling. It cast a sickening yellow glow that sent weird shadows dancing around the grimy walls; it revealed the singular stock of merchandise in strange silhouettes.

It might have been imagined that the proprietor hadn't moved since Horatio had left him more than twelve hours before. His arms were still folded on his chest, his deep-set cruel eyes peered up and down the street through his spectacles.

As he caught sight of a small man in a rumpled gray suit and brown soft hat, who was walking toward the shop, his frown gave way to a sly smile. He stepped quickly back into the shop. But a moment later he was back in the doorway again. The man in the gray suit was only a few feet away.

"Ja! So you have come right on time!" the man in the skull cap exclaimed. "Captain Mullet was here already yet. He asks you to wait for him. He'll be back right away. Come in!"

"Why—a—thank you. Thank you very much."

The shopkeeper stood aside, rubbing his

hands. The man in the gray suit entered, looked about.

"So Captain Mullet will be back, you say?"

"Ja! Ja! He'll be here right away soon."

A peculiar expression appeared in the other man's pale blue eyes. But he said nothing.

The curio-shop proprietor bustled about till he had dug out a chair that appeared substantial. He dusted it off carefully. Then he placed it near the rear of the room, near the curtained doorway.

"Have a seat."

"Why—a thank you. My word, thank you very much."

"Maybe I could do something for you yet?" the owner said.

"No, I don't believe so."

"And maybe yet I could," the man in the skull cap repeated. He gave a short laugh, a sort of cackle of triumph.

The man in the chair looked at him in astonishment, started to rise. But before he could move, something crashed upon his head with terrific force. He felt himself falling—down—down into a bottomless pit. Then sudden utter blackness.

THE moment Leander Jones recovered consciousness he realized that he had walked into a trap which the wily little shop keeper had prepared for his brother. But why had the proprietor of the Seven Seas establishment wanted to capture Horatio? It meant that Horatio had been up to something while he, Leander, was down in Maine? But what the devil was it?

Leander decided to let any attempt to figure out the answers wait until his head had ceased to ache quite so much.

He was lying on the floor face up. His hands were securely bound behind his back. His ankles, too, were tied with stout cords, and around his mouth a none too clean handkerchief served as a gag.

Even before he opened his eyes, Leander cursed himself softly. He should have been on his guard when the little shop keeper had said Mullet was coming to this place, had already been here once this evening. Leander knew that wasn't possible.

Suppressing a groan, he looked about him. He was in a room of considerable size. From his position on the floor, he could see that it was furnished with a large desk, half a dozen chairs, a couple of big cabinets and a bookcase. Beside the desk he caught a glimpse of an old-fashioned globe on an oak pedestal. There were numerous copper and brass urns and vases on shelves and scattered about the room.

It was, he decided, the private office of the curio shop's owner.

He became aware of voices. At first, he couldn't see the speakers; then by twisting his body he managed to make them out, standing by the door.

One was the man in the skull cap. The other was a yellow-skinned man of huge size. A half-caste Chinaman, Leander decided. He was holding a banknote in his hand.

"Any time you want me for another little job like this, Pross, just let me know," the big man said with a saturnine smile. He spoke with no trace of Chinese accent.

"Ja! You did a good job yet."

"You got your ten dollars' worth." He laughed, turned and disappeared through the door. Pross followed him. Leander could hear their footsteps growing fainter.

What next, Leander wondered. This was a bitter climax to his record-breaking dash back from Maine. To walk blindly into a trap that had been baited for Horatio.

Pross came back. He walked to the corner of the room where Leander was

lying, bent over, leered down at the recumbent figure.

"So—Detective Jones," he cackled. "Well, well, well! My good friend, Mr. Clancy, said last night you would call maybe. He knew what he was talking about, yes!"

Leander was trying to figure out who Clancy was. Pross nudged his ribs with the toe of his shoe. "You shouldn't interfere with what is none of your business, Jones," Pross continued. "It's going to cost you more than you want to pay, more than anybody wants to pay."

He gave Leander a parting push with his foot, then walked across the room to the one big window. Reaching up, he pulled down the shade until it covered the entire opening. After that, he walked to his desk and switched on a lamp with a flexible goose neck. From one of the cabinets, he took a couple of small ledgers, which he placed on the desk.

AN HOUR passed. To Leander, lying on the floor with his bonds cutting off his circulation, every minute was beginning to be agony. But he could do nothing. His gag prevented him from calling out, from asking his cruel-eyed captor for so much as a drink of water.

As for Pross, he ignored the man on the floor. He bent over his books, checking and rechecking, making occasional entries.

From somewhere below, the sound of a bell ringing floated up. Out of one corner of his eye, Leander saw Pross grow tense. The little man leaned forward, cupped a hand about one of his big ears.

Again the bell. But this time it sounded in a regular series of three double rings. This was repeated. Pross got quickly to his feet and shuffled from the room.

A little later, Leander heard voices below and soon afterward Pross reappeared. He was followed by two men. The first

was young, in his early twenties. He was dark, well built and would have been good looking except for his shifty eyes and a surly mouth. He was wearing a cap, pulled down slightly on one side of his head.

The second man was Mike the Mauler Clancy. So that was the Clancy whom Pross had mentioned. Leander knew him, knew his record.

"Well, you got it, yes?" Pross exclaimed. His voice was high, trembling with excitement, eager. He rubbed his skinny hands together, cracked his knuckles. "Let us see! Let us see!"

"Not so fast," Clancy growled. "We got lots of time."

"You had no trouble in finding it this time then," Pross said.

The man in the cap spoke. "Naw. Mullet knew how to read them directions. If I'd known I'd have got the stuff myself the other trip."

"Ja!" Pross exclaimed. "Where is Mullet?"

Clancy laughed, a brief, heartless laugh. "You tell him, Crocker!" he said to the man in the cap.

"Well, Pop," Crocker said, grinning at Pross, "we figured that it'd make a little more for each of us if we was to split this stuff three ways instead of four." He echoed Clancy's laugh.

Pross took a quick breath. He pushed his head even farther forward on his turtle neck and blinked over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles. His eyes were bright, glossy.

"So—you mean that you—"

"Never mind!" Clancy interrupted gruffly. "We've rubbed out Mullet. That's all there is to it. Forget about it, see!"

Leander repressed a shudder. Mullet's death was no news to him. He'd found the old sailor's body there behind the captain's rock at Hollis Harbor. And it was in Mullet's clothes that he'd come

across the address of the Seven Seas Curio Shop. But the cold-blooded way in which Clancy admitted killing the old man filled Leander with horror. As he considered his own situation, he could feel the muscles in his throat tighten.

The three men had moved to the desk. Most of the room was in semi-darkness, but the top of the desk was brilliantly illuminated by the goose-neck lamp.

"All right, Crocker," Clancy said. "Give us the box! We'll let Pop here figure out what the stuff's worth."

From under his coat, the man in the cap produced a red lacquer box. It was about the size of a cigar box, although of slightly different shape. It had a brass lock which showed signs of having been forced. Crocker laid the box on the table.

From the drawer of the desk, Pross removed a pistol which he placed on the desk top. He also took out several sheets of paper and a pencil.

Suddenly Clancy let out an oath. His eyes were fixed upon one corner of the room, on the trussed-up figure of Leander Jones.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed. In a couple of swift strides he had crossed the room. He looked down at the man on the floor. Then a wide smile broke out on his face. "By God! It's that little rat, Jones!"

"Ja!" Pop Pross said. "He came around this afternoon, just like you said he would yet. So I thought I'd better keep him till you got back."

Clancy leered at the helpless Leander. "What a break," he said softly. "Jones—it's going to be a lotta fun—removing you from circulation for good!"

MIKE THE MAULER CLANCY walked back to the desk. He stood across from Pross. Crocker stood beside the hunched owner of the curio shop. Pross picked up the red lacquer box, ex-

amined it carefully, turning it over and over in his hands.

"From India," he grunted.

"Never mind where it's from," Clancy said. "It's from Hollis Harbor, Maine, so far's I'm concerned. You just open her up and you'll see a sight you've never seen the like of in all the years you been a fence."

Pross looked up. "The key? Where is it?"

"Key, hell! Get it open the way we did. With a screw driver."

"It's a valuable box," Pross muttered. But he opened the desk drawer and rummaged around until he found a small screw driver. He inserted this under the lid of the box and applied pressure. The lid snapped back.

Pross gave voice to a guttural gasp. Then he exhaled slowly, noisily. Crocker and Clancy bent over the table, their eyes glued to the inside of the box.

"By God!" Clancy breathed. "It looks even better than it did up there."

"The light makes 'em sparkle," Crocker nodded.

Pross turned the box upside down. Out upon the top of the desk cascaded dozens of unset gems and several strings of pearls. There were diamonds, rubies, emeralds. And besides the necklaces there were countless unset pearls. They reflected the light in a thousand twinkling rays, a dazzling display that was almost blinding.

The jewels, the diamonds, especially, seemed to be alive. They seemed to move, to revolve, to shoot off beams of living fire.

Pross was breathing heavily. He ran the palm of his hand over the heap of gems and spread them out till they covered a square foot of the table top. Finally, he looked up and squinted across the table at Clancy.

"So this is Captain Condit's treasure, yes?"

"Them's the old fool's jewels," Clancy said. "And a sweet pile of 'em, too."

"Ja," Pross nodded. "Where did he get them yet, I wonder."

"Stole 'em."

"What?"

"Sure. That's what Mullet said. He stole 'em from a guy who stole 'em himself."

"I—I don't understand," Pross muttered.

"Well, this is how it was," Clancy said. "When this guy Condit was makin' his last trip on his boat, he picked up some mugg at a port over in India. This mugg was scrambling out of the country, see? And he offered Condit heavy sugar to help him make his getaway."

"Ja."

"O. K. Well, when they got out to sea Condit learns why this mugg's in such a rush. He's robbed some kind of a dealer in gems—and he's got the stuff with him. That gives Condit an idea. He'd been going to sea for pretty near fifty years and he didn't have nothing to show for it. He'd dropped his savings in a phony gold mine or something.

"Anyway, there was a big storm. And when the storm was over there wasn't any sign of the mugg they'd picked up in India, see?"

"Ja, I see," Pross nodded.

"Old Condit thought nobody was onto him. He quit the sea and Mullet who was his mate quit, too. Then Mullet drops a broad hint that he knows just what the play is. That scares hell out of Condit. He takes Mullet with him to the Anchorage and pays all his expenses for ten years. He knows Mullet knows, but they don't talk about it. And the captain never lets out a peep where he's got the stuff hid."

"And once a year," Pross muttered,

"Condit would come here with three or four diamonds to sell. He did that for ten years. That's what gave me my idea," he added with a mirthless chuckle. "And gentlemen, you see here now the results of that idea!"

He made a sweeping gesture above the gems with his right hand.

CLANCY gripped the edge of the desk and, leaning over, peered sharply into Pross's crafty face. "How much," he said narrowly, "do you figure this pile of rocks is worth?"

Pross shrugged, lifted his palms. "How can I tell, till I've checked them."

"Make a guess!" Clancy snapped.

"Perhaps they are worth—a half million," Pross muttered. "If they are, we may be able to sell them for a quarter of a million. If we take our time."

"My God," Clancy breathed. "That's haul, ain't it, Crocker?"

The man in the cap nodded. He was staring as if hypnotized at the jewels spread before him. He wet his lips nervously. "I'll—I'll say it is."

"Better get busy and make a list of the stuff," Clancy said to Pross. "If we know just what's there, we'll know if anyone tries to lift any of it." He closed one eye, fastened the other one significantly upon Pross.

Pross paid no attention to him. He pushed the gems to one side, pulled one of the sheets of paper and the pencil closer to him. He picked up one of the diamonds, rolled it around in his palm and then, seizing it between thumb and forefinger, held it up to the light. The way he handled the gem was almost a caress.

"I won't weigh them," Pross said. "Just guess at the size and make a rough list."

"O. K."

The window shade, loosened by the vibration from the elevated, suddenly rolled upward. It spun around the roller sev-

eral times and then dropped halfway down again over the window. The sound was unexpected, startling. All eyes turned toward it. Clancy and Crocker let out nervous oaths.

"Fix the damn thing!" Clancy growled.

Crocker crossed the room. He pulled the shade down, tried to make it catch. But the ratchet was worn and it wouldn't stay.

Clancy noticing the difficulty muttered: "Let it go! Nobody can see in from out there anyway. Not unless he's over in Brooklyn with a spyglass," he added with a curt laugh.

Crocker returned to his position beside Pross, who had separated the diamonds from the other gems and was examining them one by one and then listing them.

There was a tense silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of the three men. From time to time, Clancy removed his gaze from the jewels and turned it on the helpless figure of Leander. His broken-nosed face wore a hard, cruel smile. He appeared to be looking forward with relish to killing one of the Jones brothers.

"Twenty-seven diamonds," Pross said.

"Not so many," Crocker muttered. "I thought there was more."

"Well, Condit has been bringing me a few every year for ten years now," Pross replied. "That's why the diamonds is not so many."

Leander on the floor was suffering untold agony from his bonds. His body was so cramped it seemed to him that it never again would be supple. He moved about as much as he could, careful not to attract the attention of Clancy. He looked up toward the window and his eyes widened in astonishment.

Pressed against the glass was a hand, and above the hand a face; a yellow-skinned face with slanting eyes and thick-lipped mouth. The mouth was half open now, disclosing stumps of stained teeth.

It was the face of a Chinaman, and Leander immediately recognized the giant half-caste whom Pross had been paying off as Leander recovered consciousness.

THE three men at the desk appeared oblivious to the eavesdropper. Then, suddenly, as if he had received a telepathic warning, Crocker looked up, swung his eyes toward the window.

Leander stiffened. But the young gunman was fast, almost faster than the eye could follow. His hand slid inside his coat and out in one continuous movement. And a second later the roar of his gun shook the room.

Pross jumped to his feet, upsetting his chair. His face was white as death; his skinny elbows were trembling. Clancy had caught the movement of Crocker's hand, followed it in time to see the man at the window. Clancy's pistol had come out, too.

But when the smoke drifted aside, the face was no longer there. And where it had been, was a round hole in the window glass.

Crocker turned to Clancy. "I had to do it, Mike," he muttered.

Mike the Mauler nodded. "That's right. What the hell was he doing out there?" He looked at Pross. "Is there a fire escape outside?"

"No—no. You can see for yourself. He must have climbed along the window ledges. I'll look—"

"Stay away from that window!" Clancy ordered. "Do you want the cops pouring in here first thing?" He was thoughtful for a moment. "Three stories. Where would he land?"

"A courtyard in back. A small courtyard yet."

"O. K!" Clancy snapped. He was brisk now, a man who knew exactly what he was going to do. "Get that stuff out of the way! Put it in the safe!"

"Ja!" With shaking hands, Pross gathered up the gems and returned them to the red lacquer box. Crocker helped him. Clancy walked across the room a couple of times, on the second trip pausing to stare narrowly at the recumbent form of Leander. But he said nothing.

Taking the box, Pross went to one of the cabinets. He swung the doors open and the front end of a large safe was revealed. He stooped, twirled the dials. When he had deposited the box of jewels in the safe and closed the concealing cabinet doors, he returned to his desk.

"How about him?" Crocker jerked a thumb in the direction of Leander.

"He gets the works!"

Crocker brought out his gun. He turned with it toward Leander. "Now?"

"Put that rod away!" Clancy snarled. "You can't bump him here. When this guy Jones goes, there's going to be a hell of a stink. We got to fix it so they'll never find a trace of him."

"How?"

"Easy enough. 'We'll drop him in the lower bay with about two hundred pounds of scrap iron wired to him.'"

Crocker whistled. "Before you bump him?"

"Why waste any slugs. The water'll take care of him." Clancy shrugged.

LEANDER could feel the perspiration spring out on his forehead. The ache and pain of his bonds was forgotten in the light of the scheme Clancy had just disclosed so casually.

Clancy was talking. "Now here's what we do. Pross!"

"Ja!"

"As soon as we get out of here, you break that glass out of the window and put in a piece of pasteboard. Understand?"

"Ja!"

"Remember you don't know nothing—

nothing about that guy down there! Remember! Come on, Crocker. Carry that guy in the corner downstairs."

Crocker walked to the corner where Leander was lying and bent over. He took a firm hold on Leander's waist and, hoisting him up, hung him over his shoulder like a sack of meal.

They started to descend the stairs which led down from the adjoining room. Clancy went first, then Crocker with Leander. The light was dim, only one bulb illuminating the stairway on the second floor, which was evidently the living quarters for the owner of the curio shop.

"Take it easy," Clancy volunteered.

Crocker gave a grunt. "I am. But this guy's heavy."

"I'll give you a hand when we get to the bottom."

When they reached the foot of the stairs, they were in the back room of the main floor. It was the room behind the black curtain, the room in which the big half-caste had hidden before he overpowered Leander.

Here, Clancy directed Crocker to lower Leander from his shoulder. "I'll take his head and you can take his feet till we get to the front door," he said. "Then I'll step out and make sure the coast's clear before we try to put him in the car."

"O. K. Let's go!"

Clancy slipped his hands under Leander's armpits; Crocker seized his ankles. They began to move slowly toward the front of the shop, although it was slow work. When they passed through the curtain, they were in almost total darkness, only the feeble rays of the street light entering through the grimy window.

"Geez, it's dark," Crocker muttered.

"Watch your step," Clancy growled.

"Maybe this will make it better for you!" a voice suddenly exclaimed in the darkness. At the same instant, the dazzling

white beam of a flashlight fell full upon Clancy and Crocker and their burden. The two killers swore viciously, but the voice cut in upon them.

"Put that man on the floor! And stick your hands up! Be careful! I'm looking for an excuse to shoot both of you." The voice was cold, precise, dangerous.

Leander's heart began to pound as Clancy and Crocker dropped him none too gently to the floor. It was the voice of Horatio.

CHAPTER SIX

Fool's Jewels

CLANCY straightened with his hands high above his head. Crocker took a little more time about it. And when he did straighten up, it was with a sudden swift motion. In his hand was a gun and he fired at the light.

The roar of his weapon mingled with the blast from Horatio's. Out of the darkness shot a tongue of orange flame. The slug caught Crocker square. It spun him, knocked him back several feet and sent him crashing to the floor.

But Crocker's shot had hit the light. The room was again in total darkness. Leander felt Clancy crawl over him. Since the shot, there had been no sound from Horatio, but he felt sure that he was uninjured. At worst, he might have been hit in the hand that held the flashlight. That was the left and Horatio would still have his gun hand.

In the dust and darkness of the old curio shop the deadly stalking began. Leander bit his lips, strained at his bonds. But it was no use. His arms and legs were numb, and even had the cords been removed, he couldn't have used them.

It was quiet; deathly, ominously quiet. Once a board creaked. Leander held his breath. But there was no following blast of gunfire. Then suddenly he heard a

weird noise. It was not particularly loud, yet unlike anything he had ever heard before. A sort of rasping whistle.

Slowly, a smile spread across Leander's face. It wouldn't be long now before Horatio got his man. That noise was Clancy's breathing—the air pushing through the distorted passages of his battered nose. A prizefighter's wheeze. It located him as surely as if he had been speaking. And he probably was so used to it he wasn't aware of it.

As if in answer to Leander's thought there was the roar of a gun. Then a scream—a scream of agony in Clancy's voice. In a moment, Horatio bent over and cut Leander's bonds, took off his gag.

"Better—better get the one upstairs," Leander gasped.

For only a second Horatio hesitated. Then he ran from the room. Up one flight of stairs, then he started up the second. Halfway up, something prompted him to turn and look behind. A hunched figure was scuttling across the floor heading for the stairs.

"Stop!"

The figure paid no heed.

"Stop!"

But still Pross kept on. He was starting down now. Horatio brought his hand up and fired, fired high. He didn't want to shoot this old fellow down.

Pross gave a shrill cry of terror. He tripped, tried to catch his balance, teetered for a second and then plunged over and over down the steps. He struck the bottom with a sickening crash. From beneath his coat bounced a red lacquer box. It flew open. Out upon the grimy floor spewed a quart of glittering gems.

"Well, Horatio," Leander murmured, "that was good work."

"Better than I'd hoped for," Horatio replied.

"How did you happen to come in here?"

"Why, I'd planned to come back tonight and slip into the shop and hide. That way, I believed I could find out what these crooks were up to."

"You knew, of course, that this man Pross had a trap ready for you? That he was expecting you?"

Horatio grinned. "I was well aware of it, Leander. And you seemed to have stepped right into it."

"I did," Leander admitted ruefully.

"He never guessed he'd caught a different Jones from the one he'd talked to earlier," Horatio chuckled. "It was probably a good thing they trapped you."

"What?" Leander looked aggrieved.

Horatio nodded. "Quite true. They thought they had me. That made them careless, put them off their guard. So it made it easier for me to get in here without attracting attention."

"What made you come in here?"

"A dead Chinaman. I was out in back looking the situation over—trying to figure out the best way to get in. Then somebody dropped a dead Chinaman almost on top of my head. I gathered that things were getting hot inside."

"They were," Leander agreed.

"So I wasted no more time on ceremony. I jimmied the door—and here I am! It was quite a shock seeing you lugged downstairs like a sack of meal, when all the time I thought you were down in Maine."

IT WAS early afternoon. Leander Jones let himself into the apartment which he shared with Horatio. He hung his battered brown hat on a hook in the hall and then strode briskly into the living room. Horatio was there. Horatio, in a bathrobe, sitting at the window and gazing out over Central Park.

"Leander," he said thoughtfully, "I've been trying to figure out what made you leave Hollis Harbor so suddenly and

return to New York as fast as possible last night."

Leander chuckled, dropped into a chair.

"After I found the body at Captain's Rock," he said, "I searched it. I discovered a card with the address of the Seven Seas Curio Shop. And I recognized it as the establishment of Pop Pross, one of the city's most notorious fences."

"On the ground nearby, I found—this."

Leander drew from his pocket a sparkling red stone, which he handed to Horatio.

"A ruby!" Horatio exclaimed.

Leander smiled. "At any rate, when the natives up there identified the dead man as Mullet, an intimate friend of the late Captain Condit, I recalled the automobile with the New York license, which I had met on my way to Hollis Harbor. I knew then that the killers would be found at this end—not in Maine."

"I hired a car to drive me to Portland, chartered a plane from there to Boston and took the regular Eastern Air Transport to New York. I stopped by the apartment; you weren't there. So I went about my investigations, starting at the Seven Seas Shop."

"You've talked with Pross?"

"Yes. In the Tombs. He told me everything quite willingly. I suppose we can close another case, Horatio. Two murders, one gunman slain, another badly wounded, a Chinese thug shot to death, a well known fence in jail, the jewels recovered. That about sums it up."

"But that Chinaman—who was he?"

"The police checked his fingerprints," Leander said. "He was Charlie Foo Sing, with a record as long as your arm. Burglaries, assault, hold-ups. The police believe he was planning to rob old Pross. I know Pross frequently had him do some of his dirty work—such as knocking me out—so he may have gotten wind of the big deal Pross was mixed up in."

"Sounds likely," Horatio nodded.

"Lucky for us he was shot. If he hadn't come tumbling down, while I was looking over the back of the building, I probably wouldn't have gone inside so soon."

Leander made a little grimace, lit a stogy.

Horatio asked: "The whole scheme then was Pross's?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"My word, it was really quite simple," Leander murmured. "Year after year, Condit brought diamonds in and sold them to Pross for enough to cover his year's expenses. This led Pross to believe that the old fellow had a big cache of them somewhere. He decided to make a play for them."

"He couldn't swing it himself, so he got Clancy and Crocker in with him. They tried to work on Condit. But they couldn't get near the old boy, he'd grown so suspicious and crotchety. The murder he'd committed so long ago was eating into his mind. He was getting a little bit crazy."

LEANDER puffed leisurely on his stogy, then continued. "Clancy and Crocker, however, managed to get in with Mullet. And at their urging, he demanded that Captain Condit tell him where the jewels were hidden under threat of exposure. He said he wanted to be protected in case anything happened to Condit."

"Condit flew into a wild rage. He swore that was a secret he was going to carry with him to his grave. And he wound up by having an attack of apoplexy and dying."

Horatio nodded. "That must have left Pross and company in a hole."

"Only temporarily," Leander said. "Pross is as sharp as a razor blade. When he heard Condit had sworn he'd carry the secret of his hiding place to the grave, and then heard that Condit had left instructions in his will for pennies to be placed on his eyes, it took him just about

ten seconds to see the connection.

"He sent Crocker up to steal the pennies. Pross opened them and found two sheets of tissue inside. On the sheets were complete instructions for locating the buried jewels. But the instructions were couched in nautical terms, and Crocker couldn't figure them out when he got on the spot. And just about that time, Henry Condit came blundering along. Crocker was afraid he might stumble onto the gems, so he shot him to death."

"When Crocker got back to New York empty-handed, Pross was pretty angry. The next time they all went up—Crocker, Clancy and Mullet. And with Mullet interpreting old Condit's sea-going phrases they found the red box. Then, as you know, they stabbed Mullet to death so they wouldn't have to split with him."

They were silent for a long time. Finally, Horatio said: "That'll be a tremendous fortune for Mrs. Condit and her little girl."

Leander gave a shrug, pursed his lips. "My word, it'll no more than keep them. The diamonds aren't worth more than eight or ten thousand dollars."

"Yes. But the other gems. The pearls, the rubies, the emeralds—they must be worth several hundred thousand dollars."

"No," Leander said, shaking his head. "The diamonds were the only gems that were genuine. The rest were excellent imitations. I doubt that Condit even knew it. He probably picked the diamonds, because he thought they'd be easier to sell."

"You mean—you mean all those other jewels were—paste?"

"Exactly, my dear Horatio! All that murder and violence was for imitation gems."

Horatio was silent. At last he murmured: "Fool's jewels."

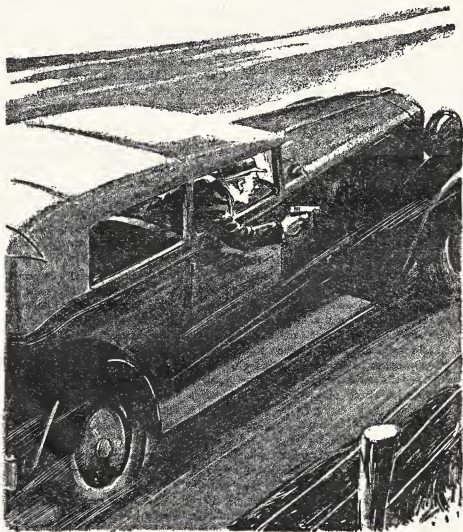
Leander nodded. "Precisely—fool's jewels."

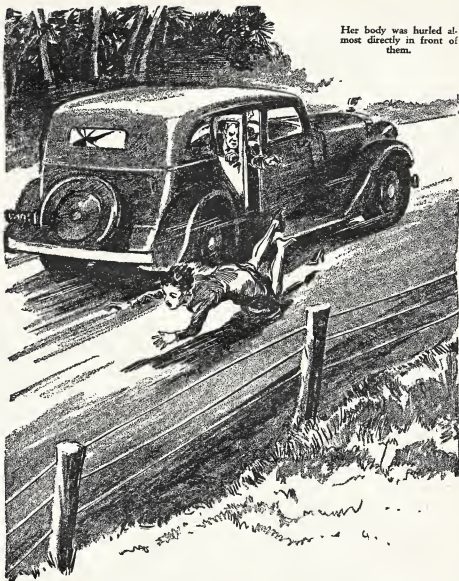
The Case of the Cooked Corpse

by Leslie T. White

Author of "The Zodiac Clue," etc.

There it lay on that horror hearth where Sara Birger had found it, the dead body that was to give Captain Barnaby more sleepless nights than he'd had in years. But murder will out, even when the corpse is cooked to a crisp—and this one was no exception to the rule.





Her body was hurled almost directly in front of them.

CHAPTER ONE

The Horror on the Hearth

CAPTAIN BARNABY planted the shiny elbow of his shapeless serge suit on the desk, and wagged a prophetic forefinger at the saturnine individual sitting directly across from him.

"Now get this straight the first time, Corbet," he warned bleakly, "because I don't aim to repeat it! Lay off Sam Birger! If the vice squad wants to tolerate your joints in this town, well, that's their business, I reckon. But when you start extortin' from citizens, then it becomes my business." He withdrew his trigger finger and jabbed his own barrel

chest with his thumb. "An' Seattle won't be big enough to hold us both when that happens. Is that plain enough?" He closed his jaws with a snap that could have been heard out in the corridor.

The gambler removed his pipe from between thin lips, rapped the bowl against the heel of his palm. His black eyes peered at the grizzled detective from a face made pale by almost constant exposure to glaring electric lights. Yet his mask-like features betrayed no inkling of his thoughts. At length he spoke and his voice was a slow, unhurried drawl.

"I'm not extorting anything from Birger, Barnaby. Sam sat in on a game. If he had won, he would have expected to get his money; he lost, and I have the same right to collect mine."

Barnaby slapped the battered desk with his palm. "He was a damn fool to sit in a game with a sharp-shooter like you, Corbet; he might have known he hadn't a chance. But that's your business; you should have collected from him at the time."

Corbet extracted a silver pipe reamer from his vest pocket, gave it a quick turn in the bowl of his briar. "I did collect," he replied grimly. "Sam gave me a check for ten grand. Then he beat it to his bank and stopped payment. I don't like welchers, Barnaby!"

With his big feet flattened on the floor, the detective pushed back his chair and clapped gnarled hands on his spread knees. His shoulders bunched around his ears until his neck vanished and he glared from under shaggy brows.

"Yeah, I get you!" His grayish head bobbed emphatically. "What you mean is that you don't like road-house proprietors in general and Sam Birger in particular. Now maybe I'm just a fat old slob of a cop that warms this chair here in the police station, Corbet, but I got awful big ears, see. For instance, there's

that little bedtime story I caught about Sam Birger givin' that red-headed doll—the one you used to run around with—a part in his new revue. I also heard that you weren't exactly crazy about it, either. In fact, Corbet, unless these big ears have been kiddin' me, you been entertainin' a lot of tough boys that drifted out here to our mountain clime to escape the cold Chicago weather, or maybe it was the cold Chicago cops. In a word, you're beginnin' to get out of line."

Corbet emitted a long sigh and stuck his pipe between his teeth without filling it. "So that's the way it is, eh, Captain?"

Barnaby's head bobbed decisively. "That's exactly the way it is!"

The gambler shrugged and came to his feet. He carefully picked up his hat and cane. "I could mention a phrase that would fit a rat that welches on a debt and then runs to the police when he's asked to pay up, but I won't. I have too much respect for the female of the canine species." His thin-lipped mouth twisted into a faint semblance of a smile. "But I'm much obliged to you for your free advice, Captain." He adjusted his hat with cool deliberation and sauntered to the door.

"It'll be damn expensive advice if you don't heed it!" shot Barnaby, but the door had closed.

SARA BIRGER was awakened by the smell of smoke. She sat bolt upright in the darkness and pushed two pig-tails of braided black hair away from her face. She took a long, experimental whiff and groped for her husband. Her tremulous hand encountered an empty pillow. For an instant she clawed frantically, then she raised her shrill voice.

"Sam! Sam, where are you?"

She cocked her head to one side and listened. Instead of the whiny voice of her husband, she caught a sound that

brought the perspiration oozing from her pores. The crackle of flame! With a strangled sob she flung back the covers, dropped her bare feet to the floor, and without pausing to slip into the mules placed so methodically beside the bed, she ran across the room to the door. As she jerked it open, a wave of smoke caught her full in the face. Choking, she swayed to the landing. Gray cones billowed up the stairway, smothering the light from below.

"Sam!" shrieked Sara Birger. "Oh, God! The house is on fire!"

Sobbing hysterically, she stumbled drunkenly down the wide stairs. The smoke came from the direction of the big library. Misted lights glowed through the arched entrance. Sara fought her way to it and supported herself against the wall. The smoke was high and she was able to see across the room. Her eyes bulged, she seemed stunned. Like a robot she swiveled, staggered over to a small table and picked up a telephone.

"Get the fire department and the police!" she managed to gasp. "My husband is burned to death!" Then she collapsed and dragged the telephone down with her.

THE fire department had the blaze subdued long before Captain Barnaby got there. The old copper was just stepping out of the squad car when Roberts, the medical examiner, pulled in behind him. Barnaby nodded sourly and they went into the big house together. They found Battalion-chief Hartley inside making notes. The library was a sorry sight; the tapestries and drapes were reduced to strings of dripping ash and the splendid collection of books was ruinously stained by smoke and chemical. Although the windows were wide open and a brisk draft circulated through the place, the air was heavy with the unforgettable odor of burned flesh.

Hartley pocketed his notebook and pushed his white-crowned cap away from his eyes. He was a tall military-looking man with a close-cropped mustache. His uniform coat was open at the neck and the hair on his chest was visible through the V-shaped notch. He nodded.

"Hello, Ab—Doc. Mess, isn't it?"

Barnaby grunted. His expression was surly and his disposition the same. He had worked late the night before and his stomach troubled him. His felt hat was crumpled and the knot of his tie was askew. As usual, his blue serge suit looked like it had been exposed to one rain too many. Doctor Roberts, by contrast, was dapper, bristling with energy. He methodically placed his derby on a bare spot on the table, put his satchel beside it and rubbed his hands with the eager anticipation of a man about to start on a good meal.

"Well, well," he beamed. "This is too bad." His manner, however, indicated that he was thoroughly enjoying himself. He looked on every new case as a possible mystery and he entered each one with the fanaticism of a jig-saw puzzle addict in the final stages.

Hartley smiled and jabbed a finger in the direction of the fireplace. "There it is, boys, enjoy yourselves." His tone was mildly sarcastic.

Barnaby gave another dyspeptic grunt and circled the table. Roberts moved at his elbow and Hartley stood to one side. His work concerned fires, not corpses, and he didn't care to get any closer to them than he had to.

The corpse lay diagonally across the inlaid hearth. The face was buried in the dead coals and one charred arm was draped around an andiron. The upper part of the body was blackened to a crisp, gruesomely suggesting a baked potato left too long in the fire. The lower fringe of

a heavy silk lounging robe remained and beside it a smoke-darkened bottle.

Hartley anticipated the question. "As close as I can dope it out, Birger was attempting to fill his cigarette lighter. He must have spilled the stuff, or it exploded in his hands. Damned inflammable, you know."

Barnaby grimaced. "Well, he used a hell of a hot spot for a pillow."

Roberts walked around so that he could survey the ghoulish sight from another angle. "That's a strange way to fall."

Hartley yawned. "Well, you worry about it then." He turned to Barnaby. "Say, Ab, have you taken in any extra revolvers lately? My wife's kid brother wants—"

"Sure," growled Barnaby. "Everybody's kid brother wants a gat, that's why we got so damn much work—" He shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I guess I can rustle up somethin'. Tell him to come in to the station." He looked over his shoulder. "Where's the old lady?"

Hartley pointed at the ceiling with his thumb. "Upstairs with one of the neighbors. She found him. Woke up by the smell of smoke, came down, took one look and called the operator. After that she took a nose dive. Better get Roberts to give her a look."

"O. K., I guess—" He stopped as the examiner joined them. The latter was quivering with ill-concealed excitement. His generous lips were knitted into a tight line and his eyes into oriental slits.

"Do you know what I've found?" he demanded, and waited for them to guess.

Barnaby groaned aloud. "Cripes! Another riddle contest. All right, all right, I'll play with you. He had adenoids!" He looked at Hartley. "Make a guess, go on."

The fire chief smiled ruefully. "What is it, Doc?"

Roberts inhaled and exhaled two very

deep breaths. The last one he blew out through his mustache. Finally he exploded: "Sam Birger was not burned to death! He was dead before he fell in that fire!"

BARNABY'S brows came together until they seemed to form one bristling line. He said: "Damn!" Then turned and crossed to the fireplace. The others followed.

The physician elaborated on his startling announcement. "Birger was hit on the back of the head, hit hard enough to fracture the cranium. He fell into the hearth after that!"

"You're sure of that?"

Roberts stiffened, hurt. Barnaby wagged his palm sideways. "All right, all right, don't be so touchy. Only this *is* a surprise. I guess maybe it shouldn't be, though." He swung around on Hartley. "Can the old lady talk?"

Hartley spread his hands. "I guess she can. I never saw a woman that couldn't. She's crying like the devil, though. Want me to bring her down, Ab?"

Barnaby shook his head. "Doc, would you mind goin' up? Maybe you can give her somethin'. This connects. I don't want to lose no time."

Roberts nodded vigorously. He scooped up his bag and started for the stairs. Barnaby sniffed and said under his breath: "Another guy that wishes he was a dick, the damn fool!" Then aloud to Hartley he went on: "Know anythin' that ties in with this?"

Hartley frowned, then slowly shook his head. "No, nothing—well, wait a minute. We did find one of these long windows open, if that means anything. That one over there." He pointed to a long floor-length window that led onto a side lawn.

Barnaby listened. He heard Roberts' voice upstairs, then a door slammed. He

swung toward the window. "Let's take a look," he suggested.

He nudged the window open with his knuckles, leaned out and spotted his flashlight on the moist grass. He wagged it backward and forward until it centered on the impression of a man's foot.

"Thank God for our Seattle fog!" he growled softly and stepped out onto the lawn. Hartley followed and Barnaby warned him: "Careful you don't mess up this print."

The tracks led to the curb, then vanished. Barnaby stood rocking gently on his heels, his eyes staring off down the deserted street. Hartley took out a package of cigarettes, shook it until a tube poked its head from the pack, then proffered it to the copper.

"Have a smoke." Then as Barnaby absently withdrew the white cylinder, he added: "Does it mean anything, Ab?"

Barnaby jammed the cigarette between his clamped lips. "Plenty!" he growled, and stalked to the house without waiting for a light.

Roberts had Sara Birger in the library when they returned. She was seated on the edge of a straight-backed chair; the table successfully blocked her view of the corpse. Roberts squatted on another chair close by. His nervous fingers clenched and unclenched on his knee caps and he peered over the gold rim of his spectacles at the woman.

Barnaby kicked a chair into position; then he took off his hat and sat down opposite her.

CHAPTER TWO

Red-headed Woman

SARA BIRGER was a tired little wisp of a woman well past the bloom of middle life. There was something drab, yet resentful about her. Barnaby suddenly remembered the stories of her hus-

band's philandering that had come to him, and he wondered if Sara Birger was dry and brittle like this—as though the moisture of life had been sucked from her—because of the actions of her gay husband, or whether his stepping-out had been caused by her very drabness.

She sat dry-eyed before him, dressed in a high-necked black gown. Her black hair was drawn severely off her angular face, and wound into a tight knot on the nape of her rather scrawny neck. Her body was held rigid and her bony fingers were clasped tightly in her lap. No powder softened the lines in her face; it was reddened and shiny from sobbing.

"This is Detective-captain Abner Barnaby, Mrs. Birger," Doctor Roberts introduced helpfully. "He is in charge of the West End Station."

"Chief Hartley tells me you found the—you found your husband?" Barnaby began.

Her head bobbed in a nervous jerk. "I was awakened by the smell of smoke. I came running downstairs when I found Sam wasn't in bed. I found—" Her mouth clamped shut and tears welled in her eyes.

"You found he wasn't in bed? Didn't he sleep with you?"

She sat ramrod stiff. "Of course!" she snapped.

Barnaby ran his tongue around the inside of his cheek. "Had he got up, or didn't he go to bed?"

"I don't know! I always retire at nine o'clock sharp—that is, except Thursdays. My sister comes over Thursdays and I stay up until ten."

The detective tugged on his nose until it was red. "Sam—I mean, Mr. Birger, he didn't always go to bed at nine, did he?"

"No, he did not. Sam had a lot of conferences to attend at nights; sometimes he didn't get in until quite late. Last

night he sat up to read. He half expected a man about a song for a new revue."

Barnaby said: "Humph!" Paused a moment, and asked: "Did the man come?"

Sara Birger shrugged primly. Barnaby grimaced. "I don't suppose you know the man's name, do you? It wasn't Zeke Corbet, by any chance?"

The woman frowned, then nodded. "It might have been. That was the name of the man Sam spoke to over the telephone right after dinner. He told him that he was going to be home all evening and for him to come over if he wanted to."

Barnaby slapped his thighs and stood up. "That's swell!"

Sara Birger's mouth tightened. Barnaby interpreted the look and hastily explained. "I mean that connects with what I already know."

"You know—what?"

Barnaby exchanged glances with Roberts. The physician slowly shook his head. Barnaby squared his shoulders and leaned over the woman. When he spoke again, his voice was gruffly gentle. "Mrs. Birger, your husband's death was no accident. He was murdered!"

Sara Birger's mouth formed a sudden O. She half rose from her chair, her wide staring eyes searching the seamed face of the detective. Roberts inched forward expectantly. Nor was he disappointed. The woman gave a strangled sob and keeled over into his outstretched arms.

Barnaby put on his hat. "Well, she's your job now, Doc," he growled. "Lemme have a report as soon as you can." He swung on his heel and strode into the hall. Hartley caught up to him as he was opening the front door.

"Mind if I ride downtown with you, Ab? I sent the car back with the crew, but there's no damn sense to me going home now; it's nearly daylight.

Barnaby shrugged. "I'm not goin' to the station, not right now, anyhow." He

walked out onto the cement lane. "But if you've never seen a guy pinched for murder, come along."

HARTLEY whistled softly and fell in to step beside the copper. Barnaby jerked open the car door and climbed heavily under the wheel. As the fire chief had remarked, it was nearly daylight. Ruddy streaks in the eastern sky heralded the approach of a drab dawn. Barnaby flattened his foot on the starter until the engine came to life, then he switched on the headlights and piloted the car into the deserted street.

Hartley patted his uniform until he located his cigarettes. "Well, if you know who to pinch for the kill on that little bit of investigation, you're damn good, Ab." He proffered the pack.

Barnaby waved it aside and rammed a stogie between his compressed lips. "I don't have to be good. Not when Sam told me who to look for."

The other man jumped. "Sam told you— Say, Ab, are—"

"Not after he was dead, you dope— before. Sam double-crossed some smart boys and they called him. He welched on a gambling debt an' came squealin' to me when they tried to collect. I told him to pay his bills. Yesterday, I had Zeke Corbet on the carpet."

"The guy that's got that spot in the county?"

Barnaby reached for the dash and drew out the automatic lighter. With puckered lips, he steered the stogie into the red coils. After a couple of experimental puffs, he answered.

"That's the guy. I filed notice on him to keep his snozzle out of strong-arm stuff. He told me what he thought of Sam Birger an' I got to admit it fit the welcher. But that's neither here nor there. I gave him some good advice, but like Sam, I guess he didn't take it." He sighed

and swerved the machine south. "Well, I suppose we gotta have some excitement for the newspapers; nothin' has happened around this town since the Alaskan boom of ninety-eight." He turned around and went up over the hill.

Hartley said nothing until they hit Broadway and drove north again. "Then your theory is that Corbet came over to collect his debt, couldn't, and so he let Birger have it. Is that the idea?"

"Somethin' like that," Barnaby agreed. "But some day I'm gonna run into a case where there isn't a skirt mixed up in it. That's the day I'm gonna drop dead."

Hartley whistled softly. "Oh-oh! The affair is getting spicy, eh? You don't mean Sara Birger, do—"

Barnaby silenced him with a withering sidelong glare. "Don't be a damn fool, Hartley! Would you commit a murder over her?"

"First you said it was a debt—" began Hartley, defensively.

"It was—a ten-grand debt! But Corbet isn't fool enough to rub a guy out for ten grand. It takes a dame to make a guy like Zeke Corbet get that screwy. No, Hartley, the ten grand was only the match that tipped off the explosion, the dynamite was there already. Yeah, an' it has red hair."

"An actress, Ab?"

Barnaby nodded. "Reba Cline. Corbet brought her out with him when he came, but Corbet was only a gambler an' Sam Birger owned a road house and put on a revue. There's only one thing some dames like better than dough an' that's a chance to bare their legs in front of a spotlight. If they didn't, there wouldn't be no need of cops. An' Zeke's red-headed hug-me-tight weren't no exception. She's been workin' for a spot in Sam's latest revue. It's called *Women Are Dangerous*." He laughed mirthlessly. "Boy, I'll say they are." He swung the car into the curb and

came to an abrupt halt in front of an imposing structure of Tudor English design, inappropriately named the *Fontainbleu*.

"Well," he growled, pushing open the door. "Let's go up an' see if Zeke left a note sayin' goodbye." He clicked his heels across the sidewalk and barged into the lobby of the *Fontainbleu*.

A SLEEPY colored boy dozed in a chair tilted in front of the elevator. There was no one else in the place. Barnaby padded down the thick red carpet and tapped the lad on the shoulder. The boy awoke with a start that almost threw him to the floor. The detective caught his arm and grinned into the wide eyes.

"Hello, Amos, where's the boss?"

The boy swallowed and the whites of his eyes rolled in the general direction of the clock over the counter. "Lordy, boss, it ain't even six o'clock yet. Mistuh Schmidt, he don' get up till most nearly noon."

Barnaby wrinkled his nose. "You been on duty all night?"

"Since ten, yes, suh." He swallowed again and straightened his uniform. "Excuse, suh, but is it all right for you to ask me all them questions," he asked diplomatically.

"Yeah, Andy, it is." Barnaby jerked at the lapel of his coat. "It'll be tough if you don't answer 'em, too."

The boy nodded vigorously. "I'll sho answer 'em, chief!"

Barnaby grinned at Hartley. "There's my idea of a real politician." Then to the boy. "Did you take Zeke Corbet down last night?"

"Yes, suh. He done left about ten thirty, I imagines."

"Don't imagine," Barnaby warned sourly. "Did he, or didn't he?"

"He did."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Yes, suh. He ask me to hold his coat while he put it on. He had a new coat with big stripes—"

"Never mind that. Did he come back later?"

The boy hesitated, licked his lips. "Well, chief, I didn't take him up no more. No, suh."

The detective's big hand shot forward and folded around the Negro's arm. "Listen, Madame Queen, you're a nice lad an' I'd hate to throw you in the can, but— Now I'll ask that one over again. Did Zeke Corbet come back after you took him down at ten thirty?"

The little fellow shuddered and shot a furtive glance at the desk. He lowered his voice to a whisper and said: "I was comin' down from the seventh floor about three o'clock an' I noticed Mr. Zeke disappearin' into an apartment. He done act like he didn't want nobody to see him, so I never looked no more."

"His own apartment?"

The boy shook his head. "No, suh, it weren't his own."

Barnaby cocked his head to one side. "Whose apartment," he demanded grimly, "was it?"

"Miss Reba Cline's!"

Barnaby gave Hartley a knowing look. "This is once," he breathed fervently, "when the common herd get a break." To the boy he added: "Climb into that cage, son; you've got a couple of heavy passengers."

He followed the operator into the little brass lift and they started aloft. The Negro glanced questioningly at the detective.

Barnaby answered with another question. "What floor does Corbet live on?"

"Five."

"An' this dame, Cline?"

The boy swallowed. "She done used to live on the fifth floor right opposite Mr. Zeke. A couple of months ago she

moved to the third. She say she wants more sunlight."

Barnaby cackled. "Yeah, sunlight; spotlight, she meant. O. K., we'll try five to start with. You got a master key, of course?"

The boy tried very hard to say no. His lips formed the negative but his curly head bobbed. Barnaby gave him a friendly slap on the back. "If you was bigger, kid, I'd make a cop out of you."

THE boy brought the elevator to a stop at the fifth floor and reluctantly led the way to a front apartment. His hand trembled as he tried to insert the key in the lock, so Barnaby took it away from him and pushed open the door. The copper dropped his hand to his holster, shook his gun loose and stepped across the threshold.

The caution was wasted. The apartment was empty.

Barnaby, closely followed by Hartley and the elevator boy, went from room to room. In the master bedroom, he went over to the clothes closet and looked around. Half a dozen hangers were empty.

"I reckon Corbet figgered on a vacation," the copper suggested sardonically. He closed the closet and went into the bathroom. In the toilet bowl he saw several fragments of yellowish paper. With a low growl, he scooped them out and flattened them against the mirror in the medicine cabinet. Hartley looked over his shoulder. When the pieces were assembled, Barnaby rumbled in his throat.

"Well, I guess Corbet didn't figure he was ever gonna use this no more!"

Hartley whistled. "Sam Birger's check!"

Barnaby took an envelope from his pocket and tenderly laid the fragments inside. He returned the envelope to his breast pocket and patted his coat. "This

case is rollin' along like it was greased." He swung toward the door. "Come on, kid, give us another ride. I want to see Reba Cline."

The Negro skipped along beside him. "She ain't home, chief. She was agoin' to dance at the Game Cock Roadhouse an' then to a party some place afterwards."

"That's swell," growled Barnaby. "We'll go in an' wait for her."

Essentially, the girl's apartment was much the same as Corbet's. However, she had rearranged the furniture to give it a feminine twist and the deep divans were littered with frilly little pillows. A long, angular French doll leaned precariously against the leg of an occasional table. Barnaby, his eyes on the bedroom door, tripped over the doll and sprawled headlong on a divan. He swore profanely and picked himself up. He drew back his foot to obliterate the offending doll, changed his mind and pushed into the bedroom.

The bed had not been slept in, but the spread was rumpled and hollowed as though a body had lain across it. Barnaby scowled, padded over and put the back of his fingers onto the spread.

"Cold!" he grumbled. "That was some time ago." He turned to the wide-eyed elevator boy. "How did Zeke Corbet get in an' out of here without you seein' him?"

"The garages is at the back. They's a back entrance what the tenants use most when they bring in their cars. They's also a back stairway fo' the delivery men."

Barnaby nodded his understanding and poked into the other rooms. He found nothing worthy of his attention. As he stepped back into the living room, the front door opened and a woman walked in. She stopped abruptly at sight of the three intruders. The colored boy gave a low moan and tried to slide behind Hartley's big frame.

CAPTAIN BARNABY scowled at the woman. Reba Cline's hair was not strictly red, as Barnaby had suggested; it was more flame-colored. She wore it in soft waves to lessen somewhat the hardness of her face. All the art of a cosmetician, however, had failed to erase the touch of disillusionment that haunted the corners of her mouth and embittered her blue eyes. Her figure, now accentuated by a flame-tinted dress that matched her hair, was a thing of curves and grace, yet she spoiled the natural beauty of it by her exaggerated posture. A short fur jacket hung over one bare arm and with a withering glance she flung it on a divan.

Barnaby beat her to the first word. "Hello, Reba. Thanks for not keepin' me waitin'."

The woman gasped. "Who," she demanded haughtily, "are you?"

"I'm a cop," Barnaby told her bluntly. "Sit down."

She ignored his order. "What right have you got to come into a lady's apartment." Her eyes lighted for a flashing instant on the sweating elevator attendant. "Oh, so it was you that let them in, eh? Well, just wait until—"

"Ah, nuts!" growled Barnaby. "You won't do nothin'. Sit down." He didn't wait for her to comply, instead he gave her a gentle shove that tipped her onto the divan. "Now cool off. Where you been all night?"

"I'll see my lawyer—"

Barnaby yawned. "Listen, sweetheart, nobody's got a camera on you, so lay off the dramatics. I'm a dumb cop an' it don't impress me. This gent's a fireman, so he's used to more heat than you throw out. Now tell me where you were last night."

She fumed a moment, then answered. "I dance the lead at the new Game Cock revue, you big flatfoot, if it's any of your damn business."

"After which—" the dick prompted.
"I went to a party, stupid, a party in my honor."

Barnaby sniffed. "Fawncy that! An' who threw a party for *you*?"

"Sam Birger!"

The copper leaned closer. "Now, angel, think closely. Was Sam there?"

She colored. "No," she admitted ruefully, "he was not."

"Do you know why he wasn't there?"

She looked up into his face, her eyes wide. "No, why?"

Barnaby took a deep breath that swelled his shoulders. "Because," he growled tersely, "he was dead!"

For the smallest fraction of a second a look of something akin to fear passed over her eyes. Then it was gone to be replaced by an expression of amazed wonderment.

"Sam—murdered!"

Barnaby nodded sagely. "Who was in your apartment here when you left last night for this roadhouse?"

Her breath was jerky. "Nobody. I took my maid as far as Lake Union. She goes to her own home nights."

The copper rubbed his nose absently. "Has Zeke Corbet got a key to this apartment?"

The woman stiffened. "You can't insult me—" she blustered.

Barnaby made a disgusted motion with his hand. "I don't think I could," he snapped, then coldly added: "Let's understand each other, Reba. I'm of age, see, so don't try to tell me the story of the Three Bears. Now answer that question, or—well, you'll need a lawyer."

"No!" she yelled in his face. "He hasn't!"

BARNABY got up and walked to the bedroom door. He turned and crooked his finger. "Come here." She moved over toward him and he pointed to the im-

pression on the bed. "Who put that there?"

She gaped at the counterpane but said nothing. Barnaby suddenly dove into the room and went down to his hands and knees. When he rose a second later he held a small green thing in his hand.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he swore softly. "Grass!"

Hartley whistled again and bit his lip. Reba Cline's mouth sagged. "What's that mean?" she managed.

"It means that the airedale that made that hollow in your bed was playin' golf, maybe, or perhaps he just accidentally walked across somebody's lawn within the last few hours." He took the envelope out of his pocket and methodically laid the blade of grass away. "But I'm one of these here botanists, sweetheart, I'm savin' 'em."

"I don't understand!" murmured the woman.

Barnaby sniffed. "Don't try to, kid, you'll get a headache. How about rustlin' us up some coffee?"

She reddened. "My maid—" she began.

Barnaby stopped her with an impatient wave of his hand. "Sure, sure, I know. You ex-hashers always forget how to mix a cup of java once you get an apartment with two keys." He opened the hall door. "All right, carrot-top, climb out of that bare-back costume an' grab yourself a bromo. I want to see you down at headquarters by nine o'clock. Do I make myself plain?"

Her fists were knotted balls at her sides and she spoke through tightly clenched teeth. "Get out! I'll be there—at nine!"

Barnaby slammed the door and gaited to the lift. The operator moaned dejectedly: "Now I'll get fired!"

The old dick scowled. "The hell you will! You tell Schmidt, or Smith, whatever it is, that I searched you, found the key and took it away from you. Then if

he fires you, come down an' see me. That's a promise, kid."

The boy sighed and brought the elevator to a stop. Barnaby crossed the lobby to a booth, phoned the station and issued a general order to pick up Zeke Corbet on sight for murder. Then he joined Hartley and they went out to the departmental car.

The traffic signal was against them at the first intersection. Hartley spoke, his voice vibrant with excitement. "Ab, I think you missed something."

The signal changed. Barnaby accelerated the car, then said: "Yeah? What?"

Hartley licked his lips. "Well, when you told the girl that Sam Birger was dead, she said, 'Sam—murdered!' That showed—"

Barnaby twisted his thick neck and regarded the fireman sourly. Then his rugged face parted into a smile. "No, Hartley, I didn't miss that; not by a damn sight. That's why I told her to come down at nine instead of tuggin' her along with us. I gotta think that one out over a pint of java. Join me?" He brought the car to a stop in front of a small restaurant.

CHAPTER THREE

Snatch Set-up

WHEN Captain Barnaby finally reached his office it was nearly nine o'clock. He found Roberts, the medical examiner, awaiting him in a high state of excitement. Barnaby growled a greeting, twirled his hat in the general direction of a bent nail on the wall and dropped into his chair. He picked up his morning mail and began shuffling the envelopes.

"Well, Doc," he said finally. "What are you puffing about?"

Roberts took off his spectacles and began polishing them vigorously. "After you left the Birger's, an important dis-

covery was made." He waited until Barnaby showed some curiosity.

The captain flipped the envelopes into two separate piles. "Yeah? What?"

"Sam Birger's safe was opened and all their ready money and Sara Birger's jewelry was stolen! Everything but the insurance papers and some phony stock!"

Barnaby slowly put down his mail and looked up. "Blown open?"

Roberts shook his head. "No. The outer door was opened by the combination. However, the inner door of the money compartment was forced."

The detective rose and walked to the window. For several minutes he stared down into the street. At length he spoke. "Who made the discovery?"

"Mrs. Birger. And, Ab, she did a funny thing. She asked for an autopsy."

Barnaby chewed his lip, frowning. "Was there anyone else beside Sam knew the combination of the safe?"

There was a queer gleam in Roberts' eye when he leaned close to the copper and whispered. "Yes—Sara Birger!"

Barnaby opened a cigar box on his desk and stuck a stogie between his teeth. "Go ahead an' spill it, Doc; say what's on your mind!"

Roberts ran a crooked finger around the inside of his collar. Little bubbles of perspiration dotted his round face. He nervously adjusted his glasses which kept slipping off his moist nose.

"I looked at those insurance papers, Ab," he jerked huskily. "Sara Birger did well by Sam's passing; she gets just exactly half a million dollars, Ab. Half a million!"

Barnaby grunted and sat down. "So?"

"Well, they were only taken out about three months ago!"

"And—"

"Well, Sara Birger seemed mighty concerned about those papers!"

The copper fished through his sagging

pockets for a match. At length he found one and raked it along the under side of his desk. He protruded his lips until the stogie was nosed into the flame, then he thumbed the stick out the open window.

"So," he mused finally, "you think Sara Birger slapped the old boy on the konk for the insurance—is that what you're tryin' to say, Doc?"

The examiner wiped the surface moisture off his face. "Well, something like that," he admitted with a shrug.

Barnaby's brows joined themselves in one lowering line and he munched on the stogie until the end was a frayed mess. Finally he slapped his legs. "I think I'll have another chat with Ma Birger." He forked a big watch from his vest pocket. "Nine ten," he scowled. "That Cline gal is due here, confound her."

Roberts wet his lips. "If you have no objections, Ab, I'd like to accompany you. I—"

Barnaby grinned maliciously. "Sure, Doc, sure." He came to his feet and began to pace the room, head down, cigar wagging from side to side.

The sudden jangling of the phone broke upon the silence. Barnaby dove for the instrument, slapped the receiver to his ear. "Captain Barnaby speakin'!"

He listened a moment and his face darkened. "What? . . . Hell!" He crashed the receiver back on the hook, scraped his hat off the bent nail and lifted his voice. "Cox!"

Like an echo a voice answered. Barnaby started for the door shouting: "A fast wagon! Hurry it!"

Roberts picked up his bag and hat and skipped along beside the copper. "What's happened?"

Barnaby's coat tails streamed through the door. "Nothin' much! Reba Cline's been kidnaped!"

WHEN Captain Barnaby finally burst into the lobby of the *Fontainbleu*, he

found a very scared little colored boy the center of an excited audience. A fat man with a bald head and an officious manner was questioning him in a squeaky voice. Barnaby shouldered his way to the hub of the group and slapped the fat man aside. When the little Negro saw Barnaby, his eyes widened and he swallowed.

The old cop growled: "All right, kid, what happened?"

The boy groped behind him for a place to sit down. "I don't know for sure, chief. But it was them detectives you all sent down here!"

Barnaby caught him by the shoulder and drew him closer. "What in hell are you talkin' about? Dicks I sent—"

The curly black head bobbed decisively. "Yes, suh. After you all lef' this mornin' these two gents, they come around an' ask me have I seen Mr. Corbet. I don't tell 'em nothin' until I ask, 'Did Chief Mr. Barnaby send you gents?' An' they done say you did. So I tell 'em what I tol' you an' they went in to see Miss Reba. Af'er a while she come out with 'em. She look pretty scared. I thought maybe it was a pinch, so I don't say nothin'. But they took her out the back door an' then she holler an' try to run. One of 'em hit her on the haid, pick her up an' jump into a car!"

"Did you run after them an' get the license number?"

"No, suh, chief, I couldn't run?"

"Why not?"

The boy trembled. "My legs, dey wouldn't move nohow!"

Barnaby bit his lip. "All right, kid, what did they look like? How were they dressed? I don't suppose you'd ever seen 'em before?"

The lad bit his fingernail. "I think I seen one of 'em once with Mr. Corbet. I ain't sure, though. He was a big fella, not as big as you, chief, but about like that gent." He pointed to Cox, who was

standing to one side. "De only thing I remember real well was a cut he had on his chin point. He kep' scratchin' it while we was a talkin'."

The copper let go his hand. "That's all you can tell us, kid?"

"Yes, suh, dat's the whole truf."

Barnaby turned and nodded to Cox. "Warm up the engine," he suggested sourly. "I'll buzz the station." He pushed through the mob and entered a phone booth, telephoned an order to broadcast the meager details of the kidnaping. Then he came out of the booth and went to the car.

Roberts sat on the edge of the back seat. "What do you think, Ab, what do you think?"

Barnaby uttered a weary sigh and clambered into the passenger side of the front seat. He removed his hat and wiped the sweat band. "I don't," he grumbled fretfully. To Cox, he grunted: "Beat it over to the Birger joint. There's somethin' sour about this damn case." He threw the fragmentary stub of his cigar into the street and bit off the end of a fresh one.

Cox was a taciturn individual. He nodded glumly, whirled the car around in the middle of the block and set the siren to growling as he bludgeoned his way over the hill and thundered across the city. Roberts hung onto the supporting straps in the swaying machine; his eyes were bright with suppressed excitement. Conversation was made impractical by the constant snarl of the siren as Cox bawled for the right of way.

However, when they finally pulled up before the Birger residence, Doctor Roberts was the first man out of the machine. Barnaby dragged his way out and padded up the walk. He held his thumb against the doorbell and kept it there until the panel opened. A stout woman in a soiled apron stood in the doorway.

Barnaby looked her over. "Where's Mrs. Birger?" he demanded, pushing into the house.

"She's out!" grunted the woman, obviously a not too bright Scandinavian.

Barnaby glanced at Roberts. Then he frowned at the maid. "All right, that covers a lot of territory. Where did she go?"

The woman gestured with her shoulders. "I don't know."

The detective began to get impatient. "Come on, you squarehead. I'm a cop. How did she go? Who with? When? Come on, wake up!"

"Car, alone, about an hour ago."

BARNABY cursed under his breath. He jerked his hat down until the brim rested on the jutting brows and turned. He had started down the walk when he heard the phone ring inside the house. The maid had not yet closed the door when Barnaby swept back into the house and grabbed the instrument.

"I'll answer this!" he snapped and picked up the receiver. "Hello. . . ."

It was the long-distance operator. "Your number still does not answer. I'll keep trying it and call you."

Barnaby shouted: "Hey, wait a minute. What was that number?"

There was a slight pause while the operator checked on the call, then: "Your call was to Triunfo Six Nine Hundred, sir."

Barnaby growled his thanks and hung up. He shoved his hat back off his eyes and squinted at the stoical maid. "Well, Hulda, whose number is Triunfo Six Nine Hundred?"

The woman shook her head indifferently. "I don't know."

"Thanks!" Barnaby walked to the arched entrance to the ruined library. Except that the body was gone, the scene was much the same as when he had viewed

it earlier in the day. Roberts tagged at his elbow. "I tell you, Ab, there's something wrong about that Birger woman!" he whispered.

The copper swung around. "Sure," he snapped back, "she's a widow." He crossed to the telephone and called the special agent's office. From that official, he was able to learn the address of the Triunfo number. He was about to hang up when another question popped into his head.

"Whose place is that, Carl?" he asked.

There was a slight delay while the agent consulted his records, then came the startling reply. "It's a confidential listing, Cap, registered to a Reba Cline."

Barnaby swore softly. "Thanks!" he grunted, and hung up. He made a slapping motion with his hand toward the car. "Come on, boys, let's go."

Cox threw his butt away and slipped his long legs under the wheel. He started the motor and meshed gears simultaneously. He twisted his head and glanced at Barnaby slumped in the seat beside him. The grizzled officer nodded.

"Out the Bellingham Road to Las Turas Lake," he commanded crisply. "An' romp on it."

"Siren?" From Cox.

"Siren!" Barnaby agreed. "Until you leave the pavement!"

POLICE chauffeurs are the best drivers in the world; Cox was no exception to that rule. He sent the long departmental car rocketing down the four-car highway with a smooth liteness that was almost poetic. Under the mastery of his touch, the engine droned a song of speed and the siren joined in the chorus. Roberts leaned his elbows on the back of the front seat and watched the quivering speedometer. When it climbed to eighty, the blood left his face, he sank back and grasped the supports. At an arterial cross-

ing a truckload of Mexicans pulled into the intersection. While the siren screamed its threat of sudden death, Cox gave the wheel a casual flip and the rubber squealed. With a strange *whoosh*, the police machine ricocheted around the truck, straightened with a groan and streaked toward Everett. Lazy trees moved by so rapidly they resembled a close-set picket fence.

Through it all Barnaby sat with his big chin against his chest in a brown study, apparently quite unconscious of their narrow escape. At the little post office of Triunfo, Cox skidded rubber and swerved onto a narrow dirt road. He glanced at Barnaby.

The sudden jerk brought the captain bolt upright. He glanced at the countryside, then nodded. "Go up to the lake," he suggested. "It's about halfway down, on the right. Cream stucco." As the machine picked up speed, he added: "When you spot it, take it easy. We'll ditch the hack an' walk up. I ain't sure what we're gettin' into."

Cox merely nodded. Roberts wet his lips and edged forward on his seat. He took out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and patted his jowls. Barnaby stuck his head out the open window and watched the summer cottages clinging to the sides of the hill. About two miles of twisting and turning and Barnaby lifted his hand.

"Take it easy. I can see it from here." He pointed.

Cox nodded, eased in close to the shaded side of the road and ducked the car behind a clump of oak trees. Barnaby opened his door and the others climbed out after him. When they finally reached the edge of the clearing around the house, Barnaby called a halt. He pointed to a set of fresh tire tracks on the soft earth.

"There's somethin' screwy about all this," he growled, raising his eyes to the stucco dwelling. "Cox, you ease around

an' hit the back door. I've got a funny feelin'—"

As Cox vanished, Barnaby stepped into the open and pounded up the winding stairs to the front door. He lifted a bronze knocker and rapped sharply. The echo came back from inside, but that was all the reply he received. He heard Cox rapping on the rear door.

Roberts rose on his toes and tried to peer through the shallow glass window in the door. Barnaby tried the knob, then went back down the steps and circled the house. He found Cox jiggling a skeleton key in the lock. "Won't work," he growled.

A sudden yelp from Roberts brought them both running around to the side. The physician had propped a log against the side of the house and was now looking over the windowsill.

"Ab! Cox!" he shouted. "There's a body in there!"

Barnaby spat an oath, swiveled and ran to the back door. He lifted one heavy brogan and crashed it against the lock. The door groaned and burst inward, swaying crazily on its hinges. Barnaby dove through the opening and came up short at the entrance to a long dining room.

The body of a woman lay face downward, spreadeagled on a Navajo rug. A thin, twisting river of scarlet coiled away from the breast. Without entering the room, Barnaby knew the answer, but he spoke it aloud for the benefit of the others. "Sara Birger!"

Roberts ran over and knelt by the body. He touched the face and nodded. With a deft touch, he turned her over. After a moment's study, he let her rest the way they had found her and stood up, wiping his hands on his handkerchief.

"Well," he sighed heavily, "she's dead. Two bullet holes in the breasts and one in the abdomen."

Barnaby was puffing as he walked through the house and opened the front door. He found nothing, so he came back to the others. Inclining his head in the direction of the telephone, he said: "Cox, call Wallace or Suytar at Bellingham an' tell 'em to cover the roads." He swung on the physician. "How long would you say she's been dead, Doc?"

"Probably an hour, Ab, a good hour."

Barnaby exhaled disgustedly. "O. K., well, call 'em anyhow, Cox, it's late, but they may pick up somethin'."

He noticed the woman's purse lying under a chair and stooped to retrieve it. Abruptly he stiffened, listening.

Roberts lifted his head. "A car, Abi?"

BARNABY strode through the house.

As he reached the door, a sedan drove up in front of the house and debouched two men. They glanced at the building and came walking up the stairs. When they reached the top step, Barnaby opened the door and strode out to meet them.

The pair exchanged quick glances. One of them said: "Is this where Dion Faver-shan lives?"

Barnaby scowled at them, classifying them in his shrewd mind. They were both large men, yet not as huge as himself. They were well dressed, black topcoats and black felts with snap brims that shaded their faces. One of the pair raised his left hand and scratched a scar on the point of his chin. The other took a backward step.

"I guess we hit the wrong spot," he suggested.

Barnaby made a grab for him. "No," he roared, "you're welcome!"

The man with the scar went for his gun. Barnaby's fist caught him to one side of the scar, bowling him off the top step. The other man got his gun clear,

but found himself staring into the muzzle of the detective's service revolver.

"I wouldn't!" Barnaby advised coldly.

Roberts shouted a warning, but it was clipped short by the bark of a gun from the direction of the sedan. The slug caught Barnaby in the right bicep. The gun spun from his hand as he went floundering back against the house. The man before him started to run, pulled up short and swiveled. As he fired point blank, Barnaby was a falling target. The gunman fired twice, then bolted for the sedan. The machine was already turning.

Barnaby cursed at the top of his voice. He rolled over, groped for his gun with his left hand. When he found it the sedan was already picking up speed, with a figure in a black topcoat clinging to the running board.

The old copper spread his legs, lifted his left hand and rested the elbow against the railing of the porch. He squinted coolly along the barrel of his gun. He squeezed the trigger—twice—then lifted his head to see the results, if any. He sighed with satisfaction as he saw the figure on the running board sag, then topple into the dust of the road. Barnaby was on his feet staggering down the steps before the figure stopped rolling.

"Get the car, Cox! For God's sake snap into it!" He ran for the man in the road.

It was the gunman with the scar on his chin!

Roberts puffed up, white of face. An instant later Cox skidded the police car to a retching stop beside them. Roberts made a hesitant attempt to examine Barnaby's bloody arm, but the irate copper brushed him roughly aside and swung himself into the front seat.

"To hell with my arm!" he flung over his shoulder. "You stick with that mug an' keep him alive if you can!" To Cox he yelled. "Romp on it! What in hell are you waitin' for?"

Roberts shot a quick, competent glance at the figure in the dirt. "He's dead!" he shouted at the moving car.

"Swel!" thundered Barnaby as the big car careened down the twisting road in the wake of the swirling dust cloud ahead.

They hurtled through a fog of dirt that at times was so dense that Barnaby could not see the road ahead. But Cox, a veteran of innumerable chases, seemed to pilot the swaying machine by sheer intuition.

Barnaby crouched in his seat, his body loose at the hips so that he could keep his balance in the rocking, pitching car. He tightened his grip on his gun and kept up a continuous stream of profanity. He cursed his luck, he cursed his arm, he cursed the men ahead and the dead man behind, and when he wasn't cursing them, he cursed Cox for not driving faster, although he knew that no living soul could squeeze another atom of speed out of the big car.

THEY zoomed around a sharp turn; the haze of dirt was lifted for an instant and they found the sedan only a few yards ahead. Barnaby roared an oath and leaned far out on his side to send three shots ahead. They were all misses.

Suddenly a head appeared in the rear window of the sedan. The glass was beaten out and a gun muzzle nosed over the rim. Blue smoke puffed and simultaneously a slug flattened against the bullet-proof windshield directly in front of the detective. Barnaby rasped a curse, leaned out again and his revolver coughed. The head disappeared.

It was Cox that saw it first. He tensed over the wheel and shouted: "Look! For the love of God!" He started to ease on his brakes. . . .

For a door of the sedan suddenly swung outward and the body of a woman was

hurled into the road almost directly in front of them!

Cox yelled: "Duck!" Then he shot off the road, hurtled a shallow irrigation ditch and crashed through a wire fence. The big car ploughed through an alfalfa field and came to a shuddering, jouncing stop that shook the breath from the men.

Barnaby's head hit the cowl. He shook it terrier-like, and looked at Cox. The driver's face was white and his right hand was broken at the wrist, but his first concern was for his superior.

"Hurt, Ab?"

Barnaby kicked open the door on his side. He shook his head and said over his shoulder. "Swell, kid! You're the best. Sorry as hell about that wing! Come on." He staggered to the ground and started running back to the road. Cox bit his lip, put his injured hand into his pocket to ease the weight and followed.

The girl was not a pretty sight, even to the calloused officers. She had skidded along the surface of the road for nearly thirty feet and the gritty gravel had shredded her face to a bleeding pulp. Her clothes were coated with a mud of blood and dirt.

Cox frowned. "Know her?"

And Captain Barnaby looked at the flame-colored shock of hair and nodded. "Yeah, an' it don't look like little Reba Cline'll ever show that face in front of a spotlight no more." He went down on his knees and bent his ear to her breast. A look of surprise crossed his battered features. He raised his head.

"She's alive, kid! Can you drive?"

Cox turned automatically. "Right away, Ab." He limped back to the car and a moment later it came churning backward onto the road. He brought it to a stop beside the body.

Barnaby jerked his head. "We've still got one good wing apiece," he growled. "Let's see if we can hoist her into the tonneau. I want to get her to Doc before

she goes out." He gritted his teeth. "If it's the last thing I ever do I want to get those dirty—"

Cox climbed out and together they managed to slide the girl onto the rear seat. Barnaby lumbered in and cradled her battered head on his lap as the car jolted back over the road.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man in Forty-three

ROBERTS had dragged the body of the dead man out of the sun and leaned him against the side of an oak. As the police car drew up, he ran forward to meet it. Barnaby leaned over and opened the door.

"Here, Doc, here's another customer for you. She's alive, I think!"

Roberts sprang into the tonneau and bent over the girl. With a gentle touch, he lifted one eyelid. He gave a long sigh and shook his head.

"I'm afraid, Ab— We'll have to take her up to the cottage."

Barnaby grimaced. "You'll have to lug her, Doc. We left the road to keep from runnin' over her an' the kid here broke his wing." He nodded at the grim-faced driver.

The physician bobbed his head and picked up the girl. Barnaby aided as best he could with his good left arm and tagged along. Roberts staggered, wheezing and puffing under his burden, but at last he made it and stretched her out on a day-bed. He took off his glasses, wiped the sweat from his face and put his spectacles back on.

"Water," he grunted shortly.

Cox said: "I'll get it!" and went out of the room.

Barnaby wiped some of the mud from his forehead. "Try'n get her to talk, Doc," he urged. "I think I'm beginnin' to understand."

Roberts opened his satchel. He emptied a small vial into a hypodermic syringe, deftly pumped out the air bubble and gave the girl an injection. Then he sat back and watched her face.

Barnaby bent forward expectantly. Would she come to? So much depended on it!

Cox returned with a dish of water. He put it on the table and looked at Barnaby. The latter shook his head.

Roberts stiffened suddenly and leaned forward. The others held their breath as the girl's eyelids fluttered. The doctor gave Barnaby a knowing glance.

"Talk fast, Ab!"

Barnaby whistled softly. "Like that, Doc?"

Roberts moved aside to give him room. "Like that, I'm afraid."

Barnaby knelt on one knee by the couch. She was looking at him with a dazed, wondering eyes; hurt, bewildered eyes.

"All right, Reba, it's Captain Barnaby! Where is he, kid?"

Her expression underwent a swift change. Her torn lips tightened and she turned her head away.

Barnaby bit his lip. "Listen, Reba, those guys have gone for him; he ain't got a chance! Spill it, kid."

She swung back to him. "They—they got away from you!"

The copper nodded savagely. "They chucked you out. We lost 'em to keep from killin' you, Reba. I—"

Her eyes sought the red face of the physician. She seemed to know his profession instinctively. "Have I got a— a chance—"

Roberts looked at Barnaby. "Tell her the truth, Doc," the detective urged.

"You had better talk now, Reba," the examiner advised gently.

Her eyes closed. Barnaby thought she had gone, but Roberts shook his head. In breathless silence they waited. At length

her eyes came open and she looked at Barnaby.

"Will you promise—" she faltered, but Barnaby interrupted her.

"I can't promise nothin', Reba! But they'll get him if I don't. Don't go to your God—"

She winced at that and tried to raise her hand to stop him. "Don't say it— please!" she whimpered. Her breast rose and fell under the exertion of her breathing. Then she spoke falteringly.

"We were to— to sail—"

Barnaby clenched his fists. "Yes, Reba? For the love of heaven don't stop now—"

"—at one today—on the *Salvador*— for—" Her voice broke, she went limp. Roberts caught up her wrist and tried to get a pulse. He bent his head over and put his ear against her chest.

Barnaby stood up and waited. Roberts rose at last and shrugged. "It's nip and tuck, Ab, nip and tuck. But it'll be a long time before she talks again, if ever—"

The captain swung toward the phone, stopped short and turned slowly. For several seconds he looked straight into the eyes of Cox, then said slowly: "Kid, we ought to make that boat; we got an hour an' it's close to sixty miles through traffic. I hate like hell to even suggest it—with that wing—" He stopped.

Cox's long face twisted into a wry smile. "I'll warn her up, Ab," he said simply and banged out the front door.

Barnaby shook his head in silent admiration, then spun to roar at Roberts. "Get this, Doc! Get an ambulance for the girl, then call the boys at headquarters. Have 'em get down at the docks. Stop the *Salvador*! I don't care how you do it, but she mustn't sail till I get there. The guy we—"

Roberts nodded excitedly. "Yes, yes, I understand what to do. But that arm—" Barnaby slapped the door open.

Cox had the car rolling when Barnaby

sprang aboard. The old dick looked at him closely, but except for a slight tightness around the mouth and the fact that his face was a little paler than usual, the driver gave no sign of the pain his right arm caused him. Barnaby said: "Good kid!" as the car shot ahead.

THE ride back to Seattle was a nightmare for the two coppers. Death crowded into the front seat between them and tried to take the wheel. Cox fought valiantly. At times he burst into screaming curses as he fought to keep his senses. Barnaby crouched on the seat beside him, helpless to aid, but adding his profanity to the confusion. They went through the crowded streets of Everett like a comet and thundered south. Hot sweat stood out on Cox's bloodless face. He bit his lip until the blood ran down the seam of his chin. As the car rocketed through the outer edges of Seattle, a screaming caterwaul, Cox started to waver.

Barnaby, watching him closely, leaned over and punched him on the shoulder. "Steady, kid, steady!"

Cox kned the siren and bludgeoned his way through the intersections. At last the great docks hove in sight. Barnaby opened the door when they were yet two blocks away. He slid one foot out on the running board. Cox brought the big car to a long sliding stop—and fainted before he could switch off the ignition.

Uniformed men ran to meet them. Barnaby staggered past them, shouting: "Take care of that kid. He needs a doctor!" Then he beat it for the dock.

A sergeant hurried over and caught his arm. "It's O. K., Captain," he said. "We caught your men. They tried to get aboard. We also searched the ship but Corbet wasn't on board. The captain would like to sail on schedule—"

"Come on," snarled Barnaby, heading for the waterfront.

The sergeant and two harness bulls joined him. The captain of the *Salvador* stood by the gang plank with a gold watch in his hand. He was a fat Latin who puffed excitedly through a long black mustache. When he saw Barnaby leading the three policemen toward his ship, he sensed that the detective was responsible for the delay. He began a gesticulate wildly, but Barnaby brushed him aside and barged up the board walk onto the deck. The chief steward, an American, hurried up. Barnaby scowled at him.

"Now don't stop to argue!" he snapped. "You ain't leavin' this port until I've looked at every passenger on board."

"But these other officers searched the ship!" protested the steward.

"You heard me!"

The sergeant looked embarrassed. "Suit yourself, Captain Barnaby," he said shortly, "but I know Zeke Corbet's face as well as I know yours. He isn't on board."

"I know damn well he ain't!" shot back the detective, and to the steward, "Let's see your passenger list."

He ran his finger down the list of names. "I don't suppose you got a state-room reserved in the name of Cline, eh? Reba Cline?"

As the steward shook his head, Barnaby grunted. "No, she wouldn't use her right name. Well, is there a reservation for a dame that ain't showed up yet?"

The steamship official scanned the list. "Yes," he admitted. "This Miss Reynolds has not arrived, nor has she called to cancel—"

"She won't," growled Barnaby. "She's probably dead. Let's see her room."

With a shrug, the steward led the way aft. He inserted a key in a panel and opened the door of a large suite. The baggage was arranged in neat piles. Barnaby looked it over. "New! That fits." He crossed to a connecting door. It was

locked. Barnaby looked at the steward.

"Whose room is that?"

The other man consulted his records. "That number's Forty-three. A Gerald Bankhead. He came aboard in a wheel chair. He's—"

A savage glint glittered in Barnaby's eyes. He squared his shoulders and gestured toward the door. "Open it up," he cut in acidly. At the steward's hesitation, he scowled. "Bankhead, hell! Bonehead would be better! Open that door!"

Obviously reluctant, the boat official inserted a masterkey in the lock. Barnaby brushed him aside with an impatient gesture and palmed the door open. With the sergeant and the others at his heels, he stepped across the threshold.

A face, heavily swathed in bandages, peered out of the bed at them. Barnaby walked over and stood looking at the man on the pillow. For a full minute they stared at each other in a cold, oppressive silence, then the detective leaned over and ripped aside the blankets.

"Come on, Sam. Get up!"

BARNABY sat straddle-legged on a chair in the receiving hospital while Doctor Roberts probed for the slug in his right arm. Cox lay on a couch, gingerly examining the fresh splints that braced his wrist.

"Sure I knew it was Sam Birger," Barnaby snapped in answer to a question by the physician. "I knew it when we started that crazy ride to the harbor."

Roberts heaved a great sigh and shook his head. "My, my, Ab, I still don't get it at all. It doesn't fit, man, it just doesn't fit."

Barnaby winced and twitched his neck. "Stick to medicine, Doc, it beats flatfootin' it. This way you hurt the other guy. Just because you're a good egg, I'll break down an' confess. Here's the lay. Sam Birger got high blood pressure over this red-

head, see, so he takes her away from Zeke Corbet an' gives her a break in his revue. A trade, see. Zeke didn't like it; he said as much, an' Sam was afraid of him. So he gets bright. He pays me a visit to plant the germ of his frame against Zeke. Then he invites Zeke out to his house, knowin' his wife would be in bed as usual. He let Zeke have it and dumped him in the fireplace. Now that was pretty smart, for they're both about the same general size an' that stunt of pourin' the lighter-fluid on the clothes to cook the corpse good, cleared up any slight differences in size, and so on. He switched clothes with Zeke, arranged the body to suit, set it on fire an' beat it in Zeke's machine.

"Sam was a good showman, an' he sure had a novel idea here. He fixed up all the details, like goin' back to Zeke's apartment an' throwin' that torn check in the toilet. That was smart, see. He knew we'd figure the dead man was Sam Birger an' go lookin' for Zeke Corbet, an' he had an idea that we'd find that check an' think Zeke had come back to his apartment after the murder. After he planted that stunt of the check, he went down to Reba's apartment to wait, as he admitted just now, for her to call him from the party. She was in on it, of course; that's why she made that slip-up about 'murdered' when we grilled her. Sam lay down on the bed to wait for her call, then she drove him out to her weekend cottage to hide until time to take the boat.

"They was goin' to skip together. Sam had converted all his stuff into cash, jewels and all, a couple of weeks ago, but his wife didn't know that. He jimmed the inside of the safe to make it look like a robbery."

Cox grinned and rose on one elbow. "But the muggs in the sedan, Cap?"

Barnaby grinned maliciously. "That was one of those things that a crook can't

figure on. They tipped the apple cart. Between them an' Sara Birger smellin' a rat, the mess was upset." He sighed. "Although no one'll ever know for sure just what tipped off the old lady. But them, muggs, Cox, were pals of Zeke's that owned part of the ten grand. They knew he was goin' to collect from Birger that night, so they called around to get their cut. When they couldn't find Zeke, they started askin' questions of the colored kid an' then thought, like the rest of us, that Zeke had taken a run-out powder with the girl. They snatched Reba, tickled her feet with cigar butts until she told them to go to the cottage on the lake; maybe she even told 'em what had really happened. But when they came to the cottage, they run into us. I guess they figured she'd double-crossed 'em, so they dumped her into the road."

Roberts finished his work and started to unroll his sleeves. "But, Ab, how did Sara Birger get it in her head to go up there, too?"

"She told Sam that, he admits. She'd been suspicious of his 'song conferences' so she got to listenin' to his calls, and so on. Remember how she told us that Sam had been telephonin' with Zeke? I'll bet the poor old girl spent many a miserable night after Sam had called that same number an' she knew where it went to."

"Then Sam admits he croaked Sara as well as Zeke, eh?"

BARNABY nodded. "Yeah. Sara tried to call that number, couldn't get an answer, so she got a hunch an' went up. It's one of those things a dumb cop can't explain, kid. Sara had lived with Sam for some twenty years an' she knew without hardly lookin' at the corpse that it wasn't her old man. Same sort of intuition sent her on the trail that meant her death. She went up there in her own car. Sam was waitin' for Reba to come an' get him in her car. Sara faced him an' accused him of murderin' Zeke. Sam says he pleaded with her to take the jewels an' all the insurance an' keep her mouth shut. But Sara didn't want money, she wanted her Sam." Barnaby shrugged to show his failure to understand the psychology of the feminine mind. "So he killed her, took her car an' beat it. He figured he could reach the city or a phone in time to intercept Reba, but he couldn't, of course, 'cause the muggs had her prisoner. So, boys, that's the whole story."

Roberts set three glasses on the work table and reached for a pint of Scotch. "Not if you want a drink, it isn't," he threatened. "You go dry until I learn how you caught on to the trick." He began to pour the drinks.

Captain Barnaby lifted a glass to the light and squinted through the amber fluid. His dry mouth twisted into a cynical grin.

"Doc," he mused. "Would you ask a hen how she laid an egg?"

IN THE AUGUST 1st ISSUE

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IN THE last DIME DETECTIVE we promised—at the end of that issue's department—to have some smashing news to announce when this issue hit the stands. News, we said, that would be exciting for every detective-fiction fan.

By this time you have seen for yourselves what we were only able to hint at before—it's spread over Pages 64 and 65 between G. H. Cox's thrilling novelette and Maxwell Hawkins' great master mystery, in case you missed it—so now that you know what's on the docket—How About It?

We knew already that we had cornered the cream of the crop of mystery-fiction writers. We didn't see just how we could improve the quality of the stories themselves. But we wanted to do something to show our appreciation for the way all you loyal DIME DETECTIVE fans have kept our ball rolling, so the only thing left seemed to be for us to climb into our jumping shoes and vault ourselves up to a hundred and forty-four pages, from our old hundred-and-twenty-eight-page stature.

Of course it wouldn't do—just because we planned to give you an extra thrill dosage of our usual top-notch mystery-fiction fare each issue—to jump the price along with the size. Nothing of the sort! DIME DETECTIVE is still going to be DIME DETECTIVE and that means merely more murder, more action, more lightning-fast detective-mystery stories for the same thin dime you've been used to planking down.

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BESIDES having had an extra-busy two weeks getting things set for our splurge in size, we've been kept hopping by the steady stream of out-of-town authors who happened to pick just this time to pay us a visit. Whether it's spring fever that gave them itching feet and diverted them this way, or just that authors are naturally saddled with a wanderlust we haven't been able to figure out. Whatever the explanation the parade began and just ended yesterday when Leslie T. White pulled up stakes and headed for Halifax on his way back to Mystery Ranch, his home territory near Santa Cruz, Cal.

As you probably know, he was for years a member of the Los Angeles detective force, attached to the office of the district attorney, in the capacity of special investigator and technical expert—photography, fingerprints, ballistics and so on—and he's one detective-fiction writer who knows his stuff thoroughly when it comes to obscure points of detail and police methods. He kept us thrilled the whole time he was here with story after story and anecdote after anecdote from his personal experience in sleuthing among the élite of the West Coast underworld. Watch for his gripping police-detective yarns in coming issues.

Mr. White just missed meeting T. T. Flynn, who came all the way from Santa Fé, New Mexico to pay us a visit. It's too bad they didn't happen to connect for it would have been a real treat to listen in on a conversation between those two. Mr.

Flynn is an ardent puller for the desert country around his home—says there's nothing to beat it anywhere else in the whole country—and he spends most of his time camping out in his elaborate camp trailer which is really a home on wheels. Says there's nothing finer than being able to hook it onto his car and travel to a new place when he gets fed up with the spot he happens to be in. He's on his way to New Orleans now, where he intends to loaf around the neighborhood of the old French Market and gather material for his next. Remember his *The Bell Tower Terror* which we ran some time ago? If he turns out another to equal that master mystery we'll feel that his Southern jaunt was well worth while.

And George Harmon Cox wandered in from Cape Cod where he makes his home, just in time to sandwich his visit between White's and Flynn's and miss both of them. He's due to make a trip to the Leeward Islands shortly but that doesn't mean that we're not going to have more stories from him. They run swell mail boats up from the Caribbean and he promises to see that a more than occasional manuscript gets aboard.

Here's part of a letter he wrote us after he left New York.

I'm an upstate New Yorker by birth (April 23, 1901). Formal education consisted of high school and a couple years at Cornell, terminated at the request of the University in 1921. Worked a bit at road building, in automobile factories, did a trick in a lumber camp, and finally drifted out to the West Coast.

After searching around Los Angeles until broke, I finally got a job in the circulation department of the old *Express*. Spent a year or so there, working on three papers of the chain and continued to draw a salary, for circulation promotion and advertising, from eight or nine sheets in New York state, in Florida, in New York City. Finally realized that of all the papers I worked for, only



George Harmon Cox

three remained unmerged and solvent. Called it off and spent the next five years selling advertising and printing in New England.

Have been in about 40 states, Canada and Mexico, but for the past two years, have been living on Cape Cod. At present just starting to pull up stakes again. South America, the Windward and Leeward Islands—and if I like the country I'll stay down there a year or so.

I like almost all sports, particularly golf, swimming, fishing; shooting confined almost exclusively to ducks. Like the sea and get out for short trips—freighters, Coast Guard, fishing boats—whenever I can. Give all my time to writing—and digging up things to write about, and I like it. Until the odds catch up with me, I'll probably keep on digging—and writing.

Guess there's not much chance of the odds catching up when he can turn out a yarn like *One-Buck Pay-Off*. How about it?

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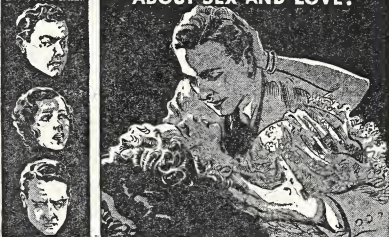
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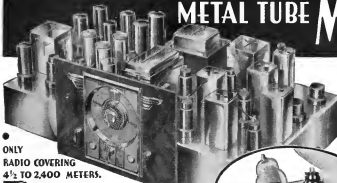
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